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THANK GOD FOR ROSIE ROTH: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

WILLIAM CHARLES BICKNELL
B.A., Wright State University, 2005

2007
Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

June 8, 2007

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY
SUPERVISION BY William C. Bicknell ENTITLED Thank God for Rosie Roth BE
ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
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ABSTRACT

Bicknell William Charles. M.A., Department of English, Wright State University, 2007. Thank God for Rosie Roth: A Novel.

Rosie Roth is an elderly Christian widow with a heart of gold who, one summer, encounters supernatural forces when her new neighbors, one of whom is a demon-possessed ten-year-old, move into the neighborhood. Rosie, by unwittingly exorcising the demon, finds herself thrust into a tangled web of secrets, conspiracies, and plots. Out to stop these plots is Atlas, a recovering amnesiac who is sent to exorcise the demon, only to find that Rosie has already done the job. While Rosie attempts to reconcile these supernatural forces with her own faith in God, Atlas struggles to live up to his own heroic ideals, to redeem himself for his years of sloth, and to save the day. Ultimately, Atlas must go face-to-face with the past he has struggled to forget, while Rosie must overcome the scheming of those close to her in order to prove her worth in spite of her age.

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I: ROSIE'S NEW NEIGHBORS

Rosie Roth burst out of the front door of her modest suburban house, pushing her wide-brimmed hat back against her head, closing the door with her right foot since her arms were full of a fruit basket—an enormous fruit basket at that. She could count the contents perfectly in her mind: six oranges, three apples, a bunch of bananas, three pears, a new leather Bible, a pamphlet from the Bailey Church of God six blocks down the road, and a single coconut.

"That Rosie and her coconuts," Rosie Roth said quietly, giggling at herself. "Silly old goose and her coconuts." That's what the neighbors would be saying, after all, when they saw it.

The big moving van turned the corner onto the street, a brown SUV behind it. Rosie felt her heart skip a beat. No one new had moved onto Cramwood in 19 years almost to the day. She'd been watching 533 while it was up for sale, watching the families show up and be guided into the house, hearing the conversations with the realtor as she watered

her petunias or straightened Larry, Gary, and Barry—the three plastic flamingos in her front yard. As they appraised the house, she had appraised them, wondering which one she'd be able to purchase for the Great Real Estate Agency of The Lord.

As the SUV passed, she caught a glimpse of the driver's dark hair, so greased and molded that he may as well have been made of plastic. The line of gray in it, just above his left ear, almost looked just as phony as the rest of him, like he was trying to look older and wiser. Rosie almost huffed at him but didn't want to show any contempt on their first day in the neighborhood. The poor folks were new, after all.

"Love thy neighbor!" Rosie chirped.

Rosie gave one last look at her lawn, at the real estate of 513 Cramwood Drive. She frowned a bit when she realized that the hedges could be better trimmed or perhaps a couple of the flowers weren't flourishing as well as they could be. With a shrug, she imagined that the Lord didn't ask for perfection—just effort. And now, the new neighbors would look next door and see that effort, consider the long rows of symmetrical hedges, the flourishing petunias, the cut grass as green as a jewel. They'd look at that house

and say, "Land's sake! There's a woman who knows about the love of God!"

At least that's what Rosie Roth was sure they'd say. If they didn't, why, that's what the follow-ups were for.

Rosie looked into the window at her reflection, those saggy cheeks that rose like flags on a windless day when she smiled. She pushed a few of her gray-blue curls up near the bottom of her hat, showed her teeth, scratched off something that looked like a bit of plaque. On the other side of the window, Rosie's cat Rusty had climbed on the back of the couch. He stared back into Rosie's eyes, decided nothing interesting was going on, thought about going to get a bite to eat, and instead fell asleep. From the other side of the room, over Rosie's piano, the huge picture of her late husband (also named Rusty) offered that same grin that was all he could offer now. That picture always gave her confidence—something about that missing tooth, that dusty baseball hat, that flannel shirt, or the *American Gothic* rake beside him. He was sick in that picture, flecked with those bright orange spots that had shown up late in his life, but he was happy even into his last days. It reminded Rosie that she could endure any hardship with a smile, even a neighbor with a fake streak of gray in his hair.

"Love thy neighbor!" Rosie repeated and turned back to the neighbor's house. The truck was backed into the driveway, the ramp lowered, a few workers beginning to unload. The SUV was parked in the street, and within a moment, the man was out of the car, on the lawn, barking orders to the workers, pointing and flailing like a pastor on a Sunday night Hell-binge.

"The brown silk love seat goes in the den in the southwest corner, at a 45-degree angle!" he said. "And make sure you get the fern back behind it before you do it! The couch goes against the northwest corner at a wider angle—about 60 degrees, and put the tall lamp behind it, the one with the cream-colored lampshade!"

Rosie stood just at the edge of her property, waiting. She waved to the man. He looked over at her, regarded her like a god regards a tapeworm, and turned back to the movers.

"That's sixty degrees! The television stand goes against the far east wall with a foot of space between it and the northeast hallway, and make sure to put the TV in the big spot in the middle of it! You know how a TV stand works, or do I have to explain it to you?"

"Hello!" Rosie said.

"Yeah, hello." The man didn't look back. "Now make sure the coffee table is in the center of the room, and I want about two and a half feet of walking space between the sofas and the points nearest the table! Do you think you can manage that?"

In the tongue of Rosie Roth, "Do you think you can manage that?" seemed to be some kind of code for "Please cross into our lawn." She did, following the man as he stomped closer to the house.

"Now I don't want to have to tell you this again: sixty degrees! If you have a protractor, I'd really appreciate it if you'd get it out, because sixty degrees is the angle at which this room is going to *function*! If you start getting any crazy ideas about how you think this den's going to work, get them out of your head right now!"

"Rosie Roth," Rosie said with a hand extended.

The man stomped his foot and turned back to her. Something far too large to be a vein was throbbing in his forehead. "WHAT!?"

Rosie looked up at the man, who was at least a head and a half taller than her. She didn't jump as he yelled, but her smile grew even bigger, her jowls shaking with delight.

"Welcome to the neighborhood, friend!" she said. "My name's Rosie Mary Roth, but all my friends call me Rosie. Need any help getting si—"

"Yeah, Rosemary Roth, that's great," he said. "Listen—"

"Rosie Mary."

"Excuse me?"

Rosie tittered. "Rosie Mary. Poor Mother didn't think that one through very well, did she? Why, I've been correcting people about that issue my whole life, bless the Lord!" Rosie doubled over and nearly dropped the fruit basket; apparently, she had just said the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

The graying man offered a cockeyed stare. "Yeah. Great. Okay then." He turned back to the house. "Sixty degrees! Do you hear me, you deaf Teamster bastards? I want to see *measurement* here!"

"Don't talk to them like that!"

The man whipped around. Rosie thought that his brows were so low, they might've been minutes from dropping off of his head. "I'll talk to them however I want to, lady, and—"

"Rosie!"

"—excuse me!?"

"My name," Rosie huffed. Her smile was gone now, and she stamped toward the man, staring him right in the eyes, her chin nearly pressing into his chest. The man took a step back. "My name, *sir*, is Rosie Mary Roth, and I will thank you to treat me with the respect the good Lord says I'm owed—for the good of your immortal soul!"

The man looked down at Rosie, arching his brows until they nearly reached his hairline. Rosie looked him over, the way he stared back at her with those surprised eyes. She got the impression that no one had spoken to this man about his immortal soul in quite some time. Somewhere inside, a still small voice cackled mischievously as she imagined the looks she'd get at the church, having brought *one more* to the flock.

She inverted her scowl, and she thrust the fruit basket into the man's arms. "But anyway, lovely to have you in the neighborhood, Mister..."

There was a long and awkward silence here. The man continued to look down at Rosie, into her eyes, a pleading look. It was as if he was waiting for her to tell him what his last name was. Finally, as if the stage manager in the wings of his subconscious was calling to him, he spoke up.

"Ensor," he said. "Clark Ensor."

"Ensor!" Rosie said, and she laughed again; Mr. Ensor seemed to have no idea why his name was so funny. "That's French, is it?"

"I-I don't know," he replied.

"Might be, might be!" she giggled, then took a step back. "Well, Mr. Ensor, if you and your family want to stop by tonight—talk about the neighborhood, each other, the town, the Good Book, *anything* at all—my door's open!" She pointed to the bright yellow house next door, with its flourishing petunias and trimmed hedges. "Stop on in anytime! I'm home most evenings!"

The unspoken nuances of a conversation often bring themselves to bear in a single phrase. If Rosie Roth interpreted "Do you think you can manage that?" as "Please cross into our lawn," it cannot be helped; that's what she wanted to hear, and that's what she heard. At this particular instance, when Rosie said, "I'm home most evenings," Clark Ensor had wanted to hear, "Please dump your son at my door whenever possible." Mr. Ensor's crumpled look of confusion smoothed out, the cosmic iron of his mind straightening his demeanor into a smile.

"Miss Roth—"

"Missus."

Mr. Ensor chuckled. "Mrs. Roth. Would you like to meet my wife?"

Back when Rusty was still alive, the two of them would often come to visit Rusty's hometown up north. He was from southern Michigan and came from a family of car dealers—a long line of crooks, connivers, and swindlers with greasy black hair and huge toothy smiles. Rusty differed from this bunch physically in two ways: his hair was red and one of his incisors was missing. The couple sometimes joked that these two physical mishaps were precisely why Rusty hadn't inherited their love of selling used cars—a shocking change of genetics, given that Rusty's family, on his mother's side, could trace their lineage back to a family of chariot salesmen in Greece if they had the information necessary to do so.

When Clark Ensor said, "Would you like to meet my wife?" Rosie remembered the first time she'd been introduced to Rusty's family: during their engagement. Rusty had been transferred to a military base near where Rosie lived, and they'd had a bit of a romance. During that time, Rusty started attending church with Rosie—"And thank the Lord!" she'd say, throwing her arms up in the air.

Her first visit to the Roth house was in 1960, and the Roth men (they were mostly men) were all present: Geoff Roth of Geoff Roth Chevrolet (his father), Frank Roth of Frank Roth Dodge (his brother), Bill Roth of Bill Roth Ford (his other brother), and Chip Roth of Chip Roth Pontiac (his uncle). Rosie stood at the door as the four men shook hands with Rusty, all trying to sell him a car, all failing. Rusty was so good at listening to them pitch back and forth, with his big missing tooth smile. He waited for a lull in the conversation, looked back to Rosie, and smiled.

"Y'all want to meet my wife?" he said. Rosie thought it was absolutely darling!

"Mrs. Roth? Mrs. Roth, are you okay?"

When Rosie snapped back to reality, a woman in her early twenties was standing next to Mr. Ensor, chomping on a piece of gum with exaggerated gestures—she looked like her jaw was dangling by a thread and could fall off at any moment. She was covered from head to toe in a splotchy fake tan that was far too dark for her light complexion. Her eyes were blue and the size of golf balls and sparkled with almost as much intelligence.

Rosie looked up at Mr. Ensor as her daydream ended, and she grinned.

"Mr. Ensor, you remind me of my husband!" she laughed. "This pretty little lady your daughter?"

Mr. Ensor coughed. The woman rolled her eyes and let out a consternated grunt into the phone.

"*This* is my wife, Mrs. Roth," he said with a sly grin that reminded Rosie of her in-laws. "Felicity Thatcher-Ensor."

The woman's grunts seemed to form one word: "Heynicetameecha." She hit the side of her cell phone.

"Rosie Mary Roth!" Rosie said and smiled up at Mr. Ensor. "She's lovely, Mr. Ensor! Absolutely lovely!" She met Mr. Ensor's dark eyes and followed his wrinkled brow up to his graying hair, then looked back at his thin, clear-skinned, fake-tan-and-short-blue-cutoffs-wearing wife. Her smile grew bigger. Rosie Roth was good at cross-stitching, not math.

"Mrs. Roth," Mr. Ensor said.

"Rosie."

He chuckled darkly. "Rosie. Tell me, do you have children?"

Rosie beamed. "Why, yes! Three very smart, very strong, very handsome young men! Larry, Gary, and Barry—

triplets, you see! They're all in their thirties, bless them, but none of them have gotten married yet. Never really understood why, of course—why, they're such smart, strong, handsome boys, they could have any woman they want! Why, I remember when they were just little tricycle motors riding around this block, and they'd play with the little Mansfield girls who lived in that house you're moving into, and they'd get along so well! I don't know why they didn't marry them little Mansfield girls! I wonder what happened to them? Last I heard, little Cathy Mansfield was going to Harvard or Yale or one of them schools for rich folk. I don't suppose you've heard anything from them, you know, since you bought there house and such, did you? Did they say anything about Cathy?"

Mr. Ensor kept nodding for a few seconds more before he finally realized it was his turn to talk. His eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Oh, no, no, they didn't say anything. Mrs. Roth, how would you like to come over for tea tonight? How about, oh, eight o'clock? We should be mostly settled by then."

Rosie put her hand to her heart, and her jaw nearly reached there as well. Tea? With the new neighbors? She tried to remember where she had put her extra Bible, that new NIV one with the nice cover. There was one in the fruit

basket, of course, but that was his. The missus, she'd need one, too. They'd be in the front row of Bailey Church of God by Sunday at this rate!

II: ATLAS

Beep.

Beep.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

In an apartment in a building on a street where Rosie Roth didn't live, a microwave that Rosie Roth didn't own and didn't know existed had just finished reheating a plate of leftover salmon. The three beeps of the old microwave echoed through the air, spread throughout the kitchenette, and glided to the living room Rosie Roth had never entered, to a couch Rosie Roth had never sat upon, where a young man Rosie Roth had never met was dreaming of things Rosie Roth considered sinful.

Atlas Robinson woke up that Tuesday in May hating the smell of cigarettes and the fact that he had bought a black couch, knowing damn well he had a white cat. He also regretted eating tuna the night before and realized that he had forgotten to feed his cat when he woke to find her licking the scent of tuna off of his lips.

"Off," he groaned and sat up. He smelled salmon, which meant he had probably not been asleep that long. Atlas had a tendency to do that, to start to do something, fall asleep for an eternity, and wake up four minutes later getting a tongue bath from a cat.

"Bad," he said, rubbing his forehead. The cat looked at his finger for a moment, sniffed it, and started licking it.

One hell of a migraine pounded into his head as his mind raced through his empty itinerary for the day. The only reason he knew it was Tuesday was because he could hear the garbage truck outside lifting the dumpster in the air. He forced himself up, holding on to the two pictures on the wall—a watercolor of a lake in Wisconsin he'd probably been to before and a picture of a pretty red-haired lady he'd probably met holding a baby he'd probably helped conceive—but he never could be sure about these things.

When the dumpster came crashing down, the ceiling fan swayed, the kitchen equipment rocked, the pictures nearly fell off the wall, and the cat's ears shot up to point.

Atlas Robinson lived in the apartment farthest to the right, closest to the dumpster in Bleach Estates, a place where people started microwaves and went to sleep,

forgetting they'd ever started making anything. There were lots of people here sleeping, forgetting they had made anything. Atlas winced; the air stank like garbage trucks and spoiled food, milk that had to be spilled before it could be not cried over and not cleaned up.

His sink was empty and his dishes were draining, so he pulled out his only fork. A bottle of Jones Berry Lemonade Soda—still cold from the fridge—waited for him next to a folded napkin and the morning newspaper. Judging from the smell of the room, he had also changed the cat's litter.

Atlas Robinson had an almost chronic tendency to wake up, do things, fall back asleep, and then forget he'd done them. His friends, if he'd had any, would've said that this habit would've gotten him into trouble someday. It only takes one time, after all, to wake up, turn on the gas stove, fall back asleep, wake up, and light a cigarette. This was, they'd say, just the sort of thing crazy old forgetful Atlas Robinson would do.

The fact that Atlas didn't remember doing anything made the events even more exacerbating. He wasn't an alcoholic, and he wasn't forgetful... or if he was, he'd forgotten already. He could remember every news event he'd seen on TV the night before: the double-homicide in Frankfurt, the carjacking, the bank robbery, the first

break for weather (67 degrees and partly sunny), the closing of Tucker's Costume Basement downtown, the second break for weather (mid-sixties all week, rain on Thursday), the President's speech, blah, bliddy, blah, bliddy, blah. He could remember the name of every single person in his graduating high school class, from A (Aaron Anderson) to Z (Zach Z. Zuckerman, a notorious sleeper). He could remember the strengths and weaknesses of every firearm in his copy of *Brutal Arms: The Neptunian Expedition* that beckoned him from the Xbox 360 near his TV. He even remembered everything he'd eaten for the past week; he could just never remember *making* it.

It was a little thing, but still kind of troubling. He had forgotten only three things: the identity of the woman and child on the wall, the name of his cat, and everything he'd ever done before waking up for good.

Atlas sighed and gathered his meal on a TV tray. He resolved to sit on the couch and watch TV in peace, flipping through the channels for whatever was on. He was more interested in events—news, sports, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parades, whatever—than shows, and the idea of 24-hour news networks was the equivalent of an all-you-can-eat buffet where they never stood awkwardly beside your table

muttering if you stuck around too long. Atlas led a very simple, very easy to understand life.

Except when he walked back into the living room, Atlas found a bassinet waiting for him.

This was a bit unusual.

Atlas thought for a moment. He didn't own a bassinet, and without a child, he hadn't been champing at the bit to pick one up. And even if he had, this one was far too fancy for his tastes. The sheer silk skirt was embroidered with deep purple flowers, and a matching sash was wrapped around the edge of the bed. The shining white lining was also made of silk but filled with something strange and airy inside, too light and comfortable to be cotton, and too much a solid to be air. The bonnet was ruffled in purple and blue ribbon and was otherwise unremarkable aside from its stunning beauty and the words in tiny script around the base: *I am the vine, ye the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

This was a bit more unusual.

It also said *Do what your soda says.*

That topped it all.

Atlas decided to find out whose it was later. Lots of things in his life probably went this way. If one were to

open up Atlas's closets, they'd likely find skeletons, and these skeletons would likely be at keyboards or at filing cabinets, rearranging paperwork, scratching their yellowing skulls, and wondering just how things managed to become this much of a mess. Atlas's subconscious was a frighteningly dusty place, one that felt antiquated despite Atlas's age (22? 23? He had a hard time remembering.). It was like opening a modern office building to find Tutankhamen mummified inside, grinning at you from beyond the veil like he knew something you didn't. There were skeletons in Atlas's closet, and they were smug bastards, the lot of them.

So the mysterious bassinet was shoved aside, pushed next to the television. As long as it wasn't in front of the television, Atlas was sure he could manage not to notice it for long enough until someone popped in to explain how it had gotten there in the first place. Then the problem would work itself out—no fuss, no muss.

"I must have company sometimes," Atlas said aloud. The cat looked up at him for a moment; she seemed to narrow her eyes.

With his tray in his arms, Atlas plopped down on the couch, carved out a bit of salmon, and took a bite. He chewed for a moment, poring over the taste, the tenderness,

that hint of lemon and black pepper, the sweetness and warmth of a meat that had just come out of the microwave, no less. Wherever he had bought this salmon, it must have cost him a fortune. He didn't know how he could afford it on the budget of someone who had to live in a place like this.

He remembered what the bassinet had told him (Did all of his days begin with furniture giving him instructions?), so he twisted the top off of his bottle of Jones. He laid the cap down and pressed his ear to the bottle, thought for a moment, and remembered the valuable fortune concealed under the top of every bottle. He picked up the cap, turned it over, looked at it.

Listen to your cat.

Atlas looked up at the cat and put a hand to his ear. For a moment she looked back at him with huge blue eyes, and there was such vastness, such depth behind them, Atlas thought for sure he was looking into a sea too wide to traverse, a sea only entered by a single ferry that charged far more than someone who lived in this sort of apartment could afford. He was overcome by an insurmountable sense of distance, of scale, of a power that could swallow him up so deep that no dragging hooks could ever find his body.

He felt seasick. He lost his appetite.

"You're not saying anything anyway," Atlas said. He laid the tray on the floor, lay back on the couch, laid his problems somewhere else where he could worry about them later, laid to rest any desire to find out if strange, stupid things were happening to the rest of the world as well. He was asleep a moment later, and the cat ate the salmon.

Internally, the cat banged her head on the wall of her mind.

III: CONNOR ENSOR

Felicity Thatcher-Ensor (Rosie cringed at the name again.) had already opened the door when she arrived, fruit basket filling her arms once again. The Ensors had been moving in all day, but the moving van had left. All the while, Rosie had been on her couch with her cat Rusty, petting him and going over what she would say in her mind. They'd be two tough nuts to crack, these neighbors, but she had Jesus Christ on her side, and there was no more powerful nutcracker in the universe than He.

"Hello, Mrs. *Ensor*!" Rosie said as she stepped into the house. The furniture inside was laid out just as Mr. Ensor had instructed: love seat with a fern behind it, TV stand with the TV right in the middle of it, lamp in the back corner. The couch was at a 66-degree angle, but Mr. Ensor had misjudged the exactness of his inner protractor and hadn't noticed. Unbeknownst to all but one member of the Ensor family, this particular angle had led to a crippling error of spiritual harmony that left the general tenor of the room in agitation as Rosie entered. It was a

nice-looking house, but it definitely didn't feel like a nice-acting one.

As Rosie laid the fruit basket on the coffee table, Clark Ensor emerged from the kitchen with a white porcelain tea set on a tray. Just as he was when they had moved in, he was wearing a brown suit and matching tie—dressed more for a job interview than a night of tea. And just as he had during the move, he exuded enough confidence to drop a yak at twenty paces.

"Mrs. Roth," he said simply, laying the tea tray on the table and offering her a hand. "Clark Ensor. Lovely to see you again."

"The pleasure is all mine, dearie!" Rosie said. She took the hand and shook it, and Clark winced—her handshake, it seemed, was about fifty years younger than she was. "My, you've got such a nice house. And such lovely furniture, too! What is it you said you did again, Mr. Ensor?"

"Clark," he croaked, trying to pull his hand out of Rosie's piranha grip. "I'm—I'm inve—investment consult—" He finally pried his hand free, rubbing his knuckles. "I'm in stocks."

"Oh," she replied. "So you're one of those investment types who makes a lot of money making phone calls and

selling companies, making money off of the suffering of others?"

"Pretty much," Clark said with a smile. "Tea?" He motioned for Felicity to join him, and she poured a cup of tea for the two of them before handing a wary Rosie a cup. She took it with neither milk nor sugar, sitting on the couch opposite the couple, frowning.

"Mr. Ensor," she said flatly. "I hope you're not one of those dishonest business types, and I mean that sincerely—for the good of your soul!" She motioned to sip the tea but realized suddenly that it was hot, not iced. So she sat it in front of her on the coffee table, trying to forget about it. "The Lord said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into the kingdom of Heaven, you know. And he really doesn't care for it when people lie and cheat their way into wealth!"

"Well—" Clark began, but Rosie was most certainly not finished.

"Treasures in Heaven, Mr. Ensor!" she said with a flourish. "Store your treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal."

"Well, unless they can steal my investment portfo—" Clark laughed.

"Where your treasure is," Rosie interrupted, "there your heart will be also. Do you know who said that, Mr. Ensor?"

Clark took a long sip of his tea, arching his brow. "Errr... Jesus?"

"Well!" Rosie responded with a small laugh. "That is exactly right! So I take it you're familiar with the word of the Lord?"

Out of nowhere, Felicity coughed and produced a cellular phone—seemingly out of the ether. As she began poking at it, Rosie scowled—she was still in conversation, after all. Clark, meanwhile, seemed to be thinking entirely too hard about the question, scratching his chin and looking Rosie over. Rosie motioned for the fruit basket and the Bible within, but Clark's eyes suddenly lit up.

"We're still looking for a church in this area," he said at last.

Felicity put the phone to the side of her head and seemed to listen, every once in a while letting out a low sound halfway between a word and a grunt. "Yuh... yuhuh... Iunno... mubbuh... yuh..."

Clark turned to her and held her free hand, but she didn't look back. "Felicity and I have been married for these past two years, ever since Connor's mother died, and we're in chu—"

"Oh, dear me!" Rosie suddenly said, laughing. "You'll have to forgive me. I must have missed it. Connor?"

"Yyyyyyyes," Clark said. "Connor. My son?"

"Oh, you have a boy of your own!" she said. She leaned back in the couch, looking wistfully up at the ceiling. "That's so wonderful to hear! I'm sorry to hear that his mother is with the Lord right now, but it's still so nice to have children around the house. How old?"

"Ten." Clark turned from his wife toward the other side of the room, where a large staircase, carpeted in deep blue, led upward. He seemed nervous, and all at once, Rosie heard a crashing sound upstairs, like a bookshelf falling over. Clark tried to force a chuckle. "Yes, that'll be him! He's a smart kid, really!" Another crash came from upstairs, and Clark began to talk even more loudly. Felicity's incoherent ramblings, meanwhile, became slightly louder.

"He's probably doing some kind of science project! That kid, always with the science, even in the summer!"

"Yuh! Uhuh! Inuh! Nuhway! Nuhuh! Tuhmurruh!"

Something made of glass broke.

"Did I mention he's the smartest kid in his class?
Because he is! Great kid!"

"INUH! IDUNNUH! WUHNUHVUH!"

A loud thump jingled the chandelier in the kitchen.

"Smart kid!"

"YUH!"

"Brilliant kid, even!"

"NUHUH!"

"WHY, HE'S A MAN AFTER MY OWN HEART!"

But the noise had already stopped by the time Clark finished, and his ear-splitting shout echoed through the otherwise silent house. Rosie recoiled, and Felicity shot him a dark glance before returning to her phone.

Rosie looked up at the staircase. There was still a dull pounding at the door, but things had by and large quieted down. She had still never seen Connor, but this was an impression enough for her to render judgment immediately. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," she muttered.

Clark looked up from his tea. "What?"

"Oh, nothing you don't already know if you're a man of God, dearie," she said. She pushed the fruit basket to the other side of the table, spinning it so that the Bible was

facing Clark. "You know, Clark, if you and your family are looking for a place in town to congregate, you won't find any place better than Bailey Church of God. We would love to have you there this Sunday! Why, we're doing commu—"

Another crash from upstairs, followed by a low growl.

"—I'm sorry, is he okay up there?"

"Just playing G.I. Joes," Clark said, then, before Rosie could continue, added, "Rosie, I'd like to ask a favor of you."

"Oh, of course!" Rosie said with a laugh. "Love thy neighbor! That's what the Good Book says, you know!"

"It absolutely does, it absolutely does," Clark muttered, getting quite tired of this book and its alleged goodness. "Now Rosie, Felicity and I have made plans this Friday evening—very important plans related to... you know..." He was staring his wife square in the chest as she continued to speak whatever animal language that strange device at her head required. "...well, related to business, to be sure." He turned back to Rosie with that salesman's smile crossing his face, the smile that would alert a deer to a hunter's presence, the smile that disarmed Rosie Roth too much for her to suspect its true nature aside from a tiny voice in the back of her mind that always seemed to say *Be not deceived*.

"What I'm trying to say here, Rosie, is that we would love it if you could babysit Connor for us for a few hours every Friday evening. I'll pay you ten dollars an hour—extra if something comes up." He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back, shooting Rosie a confident point with one hand as he did so. "So what do you say? Help us out? Christian charity and all that jazz?"

At first, Rosie turned it over in her head. *All that jazz?* Why, there was certainly more to Christian charity than that! Rosie didn't like Clark Ensor, but she loved him just as much as her faith required, pitied the poor man for having no idea of what true Christian faith was about. She nearly said no.

Until she glanced upstairs.

There, poking his head around a corner at the top of the stairs, a spiky-headed ten-year-old boy stared at Rosie, a maniacal grin on his face. He bared his white teeth, and his eyes seemed to flash crimson hellfire for a fraction of a second. Deep within his soul, something howled, and Rosie thought she could hear the death throes of love and compassion in the universe, the merciless cackling of a knight betraying his lord in ancient times, the venomous snicker of a McDonald's employee who only

filled the ketchup bottles halfway before departing to engage in Lord knows what sort of debauchery.

He was the most misbehaved boy Rosie had ever seen.

"Clark," she said, "you bring him to me on Fridays. I'd love to watch him."

IV: LANDWARRIOR

Atlas shot straight up to the sound of gunfire filling his apartment.

His first reaction was to check on his cat, and she was fine—she was pawing at the TV stand on the far side of the room, just opposite the couch where he had fallen asleep again. His second reaction, naturally, was to roll onto the floor, cover his head, and wait for a break in the fire that was long enough for him to escape to his bathroom.

He did so—rather un-heroically—banging his forehead against the floor.

His brains felt rattled—a skeleton deep in his closet lost a femur and didn't feel compelled to pick it up. Jarring his mind, of course, was the last thing on Atlas's mind right now, but that was probably because of how often said mind had been jarred. It must've been a lot. How else could Atlas have forgotten he was in the middle of a firefight and dozed off?

Bullets whizzed past overhead. They ricocheted off of steel. Someone screamed.

Near his head, a faint voice whispered. Had he been hit? Was some bellhop at the gates of Hell welcoming him home?

Atlas listened. It was coming from a radio.

"Dude!" he heard. "Dude, you, like, there? Dude, we're, like, getting our asses kicked!"

Atlas looked up. The voice was coming from a headset lying on the ground. The headset was lying next to an Xbox 360 controller. The controller was attached to the video game system that was attached to the TV that was attached to the surround sound system that was blaring the sounds of gunfire from his copy of *Brutal Arms: The Neptunian Expedition*.

He felt stupid.

Dark mysteries sung dirge-slow songs in Atlas's head that he tried to ignore. He had no idea how the Xbox had been turned on. On the other hand, it seemed easier for him to just put on the headset, to pick up the controller, and to dive right in than to wonder how he had gotten there. After all, it sounded like he was needed.

"Sorry," he said. "I dozed off." He took his bearings from the screen and recognized that the level was Ceres

Station, which made about as much sense as a level in a game about an expedition to Neptune as a level set in Detroit in a game about ancient Greece. (Ancient Greece? Why was he thinking about Ancient Greece?)

"Dude! It's about time!" a voice in the headset said—about sixteen, Atlas guessed, and with plenty of time to play plenty of *Brutal Arms* all the time—Atlas's young kindred spirit. "You, like, spaced out on us there! Blue team's got the flag!"

Capture the Flag. Atlas flipped through his weaponry. Heavy explosives. An automatic. A cannon that shot liquid magma for some reason. And a very nasty exploding device that returned to the wielder's hands known as the kaboomerang.

In front of him on the screen, a man in red robot armor beckoned—the same teammate who was talking to him over the headset. Above his head, his handle—"LandWarrior69"—appeared. He was not the 69th LandWarrior, but he was the first one to decide that all who saw his name must also know his predilection for oral sex. Atlas's handle—"TheExploderOfYou"—was meant to remind foes of their inevitable fate on the battlefield should they meet him. Another teammate on the screen, "dane_cook_roolz," simply

thought Dane Cook ruled but spelling could take a long walk off a virtual pier.

"Who's got the flag?" Atlas asked.

"Whoa! Whoa, man! Easy!" LandWarrior said. He led Atlas and his teammate out of the bunker where they stood and onto a more open field, an asteroid surface under the stars. "We'll get him. His name is, like, Doom Man or something, y'know? He's almost got the flag back at his base. Hey, Dane!"

A bored thirteen-year-old spoke through the speakers. "Yeah?"

"Give us some cover fire from back here. Exploder and I are gonna make a run for it."

"Okay."

As Atlas's video game counterpart and this mighty warrior of land and fellatio crossed the plains of Ceres, Atlas suddenly felt sure he had forgotten something important. His first reaction was to check the baby, but he knew he didn't have a baby. Bassinet? Why was his mind talking about bassinets? And why was he suddenly hungry for salmon?

His cat stood beside the TV tray, scratching at a door to the cabinet that held his games. She seemed to be growling.

On the screen, a man in blue robot armor that matched his suddenly appeared brandishing a red flag and a bayonet. His name was "dOoMbRiNgEr666," an ancient moniker derived from a time when people thought that alternative capital and lowercase letters was the coolest thing in the world, which is exactly why historical notables such as gEnGhIs KhAn and RiChArD dA LiOnHeArTeD had decided to do so as well.

The "666" just meant he was stupid.

"YEAH!" a new voice shouted from the headset, this one with his headset turned up far too loud. He sounded a day or two over ten. "Hey ass-clowns, I've got your flag! Yeah! You want this? You can't have it! Yeah! Watch this!" Atlas watched the character duck under the cover fire and stab dane_cook_roolz in the chest with their own flag, just as Napoleon had probably not perished at Waterloo. "Yeah! You like that? I killed your teammate! You got a girlfriend, douche bags, because if you do, I'm gonna be all over her tonight!"

"Dude," LandWarrior said. "That, like, doesn't make any sense."

"SHUT UP, DOUCHE BAG!" the kid shouted, ducking in and out of Atlas and LandWarrior's gunfire. "I've got your

flag! I've got your flag because you suck! You suck like your mom sucked last night! You suck li--"

Atlas took a bullet wound to the chest that was well worth it if it meant he could access the menu that let him mute dOoMbRiNgEr666.

"You got this guy on mute, man?" LandWarrior asked.

"Definitely," Atlas said. His cat was getting even antsier at the cabinet.

"Guy's a tool, man," LandWarrior said. "Don't listen to him. Hey, since Dane kicked off, can I ask you something?"

"Whatever," Atlas said. He switched to his magma gun and began unloading red-hot goop toward dOoMbRiNgEr666, who was engaging in the ancient tactic of jumping around to make himself harder to hit as described in Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War*.

"Do you ever, like, think you might be an animal? Because I, like, think I might actually be a hawk."

Oh, okay, he was either crazy or high and probably the most coherent person in the game right now. Atlas listened but didn't respond.

"Because, like, I think it might be possible for us to, you know, have the souls of animals and stuff? And I

just think hawks are like—my kindred spirits and stuff. Y'know? I have dreams that I can fly sometimes."

"That's great," Atlas said. He switched to a rocket launcher and fired where he thought dOoMbRiNgEr666 was going to land—he didn't land there.

"And sometimes I have dreams that I'm feeding on mice."

"Perfectly normal."

"And sometimes I have dreams that I'm with another male hawk, and we're all alone and filled with, y'know, urges, and—"

Atlas shot dOoMbRiNgEr666 in such a way that he was sure he wouldn't miss, and whatever LandWarrior said next was drowned out by a massive explosion. It was the most welcome explosion he'd ever heard.

"WHOA!" LandWarrior shouted. "Incredible, man!"

When the smoke cleared, the red flag lay on the ground. LandWarrior ran toward it and picked it up, and it teleported back to their base.

"Awesome frag, man! Awesome! I think that was the last person on their team!" Sure enough, the words "RED TEAM VICTORIOUS" scrolled across the top of the screen. Atlas pondered a second game but decided he couldn't stand anyone in this room right now, and anyway, he still felt tired.

"Listen, I've gotta jet," he said, standing up and walking toward the TV.

"No problem, man. It's been fun. And remember, listen to your cat."

Atlas was a second away from turning off his headset. He stopped.

"...what did you say?"

"Listen to your cat, man," LandWarrior repeated. "Did you know that the ancient Egyptians worshipped cats? Same with the Japanese, I think. Anyway, I don't know why I'm telling you this. I just think you should know that you should listen to your cat. That's all. She may be, like, smarter than you know."

Atlas pulled his headset off of his head. He looked over at his cat at the cabinet, then held his ear towards her. She wasn't purring, but she was making a growling noise that it wasn't normal for cats to make. She continued to paw at the cabinet until he popped it open.

The cat made a bee-line for the game on top of the pile, one that Atlas hadn't seen before. The cover featured a group of burly Greek gods hurling lightning at one another in poses that would look better airbrushed on the side of some mullet-head's van than they did on the cover

of a game. The title, set off in huge marble-covered block letters, was *Listen to Your Cat*.

But Atlas knew he could only listen to his cat so often, and he was tired, and this game looked stupid. He turned off the Xbox 360 and returned to the couch, where he laid down. The cat, instead of letting him go, leapt onto his chest, reared back onto her claws, and hissed—a hiss almost un-catlike in its ferocity. For just a second, Atlas thought about playing the game before he remembered who was running the show, who had the biggest arms, and who could knock whose fuzzy white ass onto the floor with one big bicep.

“Down,” he muttered, then rolled onto his side. He was asleep again before he could remember again what LandWarrior had said.

The cat climbed on top of the cabinet and glared at him for hours.

V: SIZZLIN' LARRY ROTH

That Friday evening, Rosie had a pot of chili on the boil and a dish of cornbread in the oven. It was Larry's recipe: he was the youngest of the triplets, and he was also the cook. His specialty was spicy Southern cooking, and he was one of those few people who knew just how much black and red pepper to add to make things spicy but flavorful. Rosie's brother-in-law Frank called Larry "The Cumin Whisperer," but Rosie never understood why. Cumin doesn't talk, after all.

When Larry Roth had moved to Cincinnati to found Sizzlin' Larry's Six-Alarm Chili, all he'd left with his mother were an empty room, a half-finished shaker of paprika, an all-the-way-finished shaker of ginger, and the recipe for the meaty, beany, spicy-yet-oh-so-sumptuous chili that would make Sizzlin' Larry a household name even in the chili capital of America. The only thing he left off of the list was the amount of crushed red pepper to use. "That," he said, "is Sizzlin' Larry's secret, and you gonna have to figure it out yourself."

Rosie never did, but she still made good chili, enough for two and with leftovers to spare. She stirred the chili and put the spoon to her tongue. The flavor danced, but it certainly didn't boogie the way Larry's did. And anyway, Rosie didn't approve of too much dancing.

Just as she turned the chili down to a low heat, Rosie heard Rusty jump down from the kitchen chair and pad off to the living room. Just like his namesake, the cat always knew when someone was at the door and was always anxious to greet the visitor. Rosie smiled as she untied her apron and hung it from a peg in the kitchen. She'd trained the kitty well.

Rosie opened the front door to find Connor staring into a little plastic black thing she'd never seen before while an SUV sped off in the street. Rosie tried to wave, but before she could get a hand up, the Ensors were off the block and on their way somewhere.

"Hello there, Connor!" Rosie said, forcing her grin ever-wider.

"Hey." Connor didn't look up, even when Rusty pawed his foot and offered a small mew. Instead, Connor tromped into the house, walking out of his untied shoes as he entered. He flopped down on the couch, and Rosie saw for the first time that he wasn't just staring at the little

black thing. His fingers were hard at work, pressing away at this, that, and the other. A few muffled noises, like shouts and car engines, responded to whatever odd code Connor was entering.

"What in the world is that?" she asked, trying to lean over to see what Connor was staring at.

"PSP." Connor lay back against the arm of the couch and propped his feet up. *Tap-tap-tap.*

Rosie managed to get a glance at something that looked like a screen, but the glare was too bright. "Is that a Nintendo game?" she asked.

"No. PSP." *Tap-tap.*

Rosie huffed and stomped her foot, arms akimbo as she tried once again to look at the screen. "I'm afraid I don't know what that means, young man! If it's not a Nintendo game, then—"

"It's a *video game system*." Connor's voice showed more inflection than he had the entire conversation—enough to lull a hungry baby to sleep. "I'm playing GTA." *Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

Rosie shook her head. "What's a GTA on a PSP?"

"*Grand Theft Auto*, okay?" Connor was starting to seem upset, and he demonstrated thus by curling his eyebrows downward—at least, he was either upset with Rosie or upset

with the game. *Tap-tap-tap-tap-TAP-TAP-tap*. Rosie couldn't tell, and she didn't care much; at least he wasn't knocking things over like he was the other day.

"Grand Theft Auto?" she asked, trying to smile, trying her best to build a solid house of rapport with a boy who'd clearly forgotten his trowel and his bricks. "Doesn't that mean stealing cars?"

"Yeah." *Tap-tap-TAP-TAP-POUND-tap*. Connor growled at the video game slightly. Rosie waited for him to continue, and he did. "It's a game where you steal cars." *TAP-TAP*. "And shoot people." *Tap*.

Rosie narrowed her eyes. Her smile didn't need to take the time to fade away; it had long since punched out, driven off, and left no note about the scowl it had left behind. Without saying a word, Rosie snatched the PSP from Connor's hands and put it in her pants pocket. A few muffled bangs and clicks came from the pocket, followed by a grunt.

"Hey!" Connor shouted. He tried to lunge for Rosie's pocket without leaving the couch, but the woman took a step back.

"No Nintendo games!" she barked.

"But it's not Nintendo!" he snapped. "It's *PSP*! It's not some gay Nintendo system!"

"Then no PSP Nintendo games!"

"But it's—"

"No 'but's, Connor." Rosie folded her arms across her chest and thought for sure that was that. Still, she thought she owed him something a little more precise, just because he wasn't her boy necessarily. "It's time for dinner. After dinner, we can do something fun—maybe play a game."

"Can I play GTA?"

"No PSP GTA Nintendo games." Rosie shook her head.

"But why not?" he whined, and his voice had finally found the range of emotion it had been sorely lacking since he arrived. One could only wish, of course, that he displayed something other than the most obnoxious of emotions.

"Because it's no good for you to be playing Nintendo games about guns and breaking the law and doing all manner of shenanigans! Rots the brain, it does! Leads little boys to all kinds of sin! Why, I saw something just the other night on Benny Henn—"

"Who?"

"—Benny Henn, on the TV. He was saying how—"

"Can I watch TV?"

"It's dinner time!"

"Dad and Felicity let me watch TV while I eat!"

And so Benny Henn took leave of Rosie's head as well, joining her smile off in some bar to have a few drinks and talk about what a rough job they had of late. *Felicity*? What about *Mom*? And *dinner* in front of the TV? Rosie reevaluated her priorities with the family; she'd have to get them into a church, and fast, so they could learn to call each other by something other than their actual names while they ate like a family around the dinner table.

But there was no time for that. Rosie's smile came back, but it was a bit shaky for having been called in at such an odd time. "Connor, in this house, we eat dinner at the dinner table. That's why it's called a dinner table."

"It's called a *dining room table*."

"Maybe at your house, it is." She rubbed the boy's hair, and it felt sharp and hard under her hand. "Now go wash up."

"Wash up?"

"Yes, wash your hands."

"Dad and Felicity don't make me—"

"Wash your hands."

"But—"

"Wash your hands."

And with that, Connor washed his hands, using no soap and using his blue jeans for a towel, just like boys his age often do. Also like boys his age sometimes do, Connor suddenly gave in to an otherworldly supernatural force that had been inhabiting his body.

When Connor walked out of that bathroom and into the kitchen where Rosie was dumping hot chili into white ceramic bowls with green ivy painted on the rim, the kid definitely wasn't at the wheel anymore. That odd little primal bit of boyish self-restraint was gone, and Connor was now in the icy grip of the most vicious, most foul of otherworldly cruise controls.

Or maybe he just walked out with the biggest sneer Rosie had ever seen on his face. She couldn't tell. It's sometimes hard to say about these things.

"Did you wash up, dear?" Rosie said, and once again her smile was alight.

Connor twitched. His head fell back and was lucky to find his spine still there to hold it on. When he rotated it open, his mouth was agape, baring its pure white teeth. They glistened against the halogen kitchen light like daggers made of enamel.

"There is no Connor."

In a hospital two towns over, a baby said its first word, and that word was "Beelzebub."

"Oh, don't be silly, sweetie, you're right here!" Rosie chuckled. "Would you like some cheese in your chili?"

*"These **is** no Connor."*

Somewhere in northern Kentucky, a hen laid a square egg and a baby was born with no left eyebrow.

"Oh, is there?" Rosie looked down at Connor with a small smile. She drew a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed it on her tongue, and the boy recoiled, knocking into an end table. As the boy trembled beneath her with a combination of rage and terror (both of them animal), Rosie dabbed a bit of dirt and drool from his right cheek. "Well, could you ask Connor if he'd like some cheese in his chili?"

Connor's head jolted off to the right, then to the left, then it seemed to spin around on its neck. Somewhere inside, a terrible and insidious force punched a wall of Connor's soul in frustration.

"There are forces at play here beyond your understanding. And your husband is in here among us."

A flock of birds in a tree seemed to sing the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor.

"Poor Rusty's always in here with us," Rosie said, placing the chili bowls on the table. "But he's mostly with Jesus now."

Connor's left leg twitched. *"I speak of no religious mythology, woman! I speak of your dearest beloved Rusty, who writhes and screams in this tainted viscera you call..."*

In the corner, Rusty the cat meowed.

"Oh, you're right!" Rosie said, turning from the silverware drawer. Rusty was hunched over his food dish, sniffing, turning, wondering why he wasn't eating at that precise moment. Rosie dropped the silverware on the table next to bowls and went to the pantry. "Thanks for reminding me, Connor. I almost forgot to feed Rusty!"

"TO HELL WITH RUSTY!"

A sunspot flared in the shape of King Ahab.

Rosie turned around and narrowed her eyes. "I don't know where you learned that kind of language, young man, but it's not the sort we use in this house." With one hand, she pointed ominously, and with the other, she pulled the tab from a can of gourmet tuna and dumped it into Rusty's bowl.

"Language?" Connor took a step forward, his head bowed, his arms flailing as if they were tied to the

strings of an epileptic puppeteer. *"I speak to you of forces beyond the grave, and you speak to me... of LANGUAGE!?"*

Rosie puffed up and stood tall, throwing the tuna can into the trash. "I appreciate you helping me with the cat, Connor, but if we're going to get along, you're going to straighten up right now!"

Connor let out a shrieking swear that sounded like someone reciting the Pledge of Allegiance backward in Italian (if you've ever heard that sort of thing). His head spun around once, then twice, then a third time. His eyes burned white fire and his arms struggled to keep his head on his shoulder.

"Now you're going to stop doing those head tricks, young man, and you're going to eat." Rosie folded her arms across her chest, nodded, and let out a quick "Hrmf!" Her sons would have known that this expression meant "And that's that."

Connor, being an Ensor who had just met Rosie and was presently under the control of some sort of manic and frustrated supernatural puppeteer who was sick and tired of this old mortal's guff, was unfamiliar with the unspoken nuances that defined Rosie's specialized language meant for boys who didn't know when to shape up. In his home, as Rosie had observed, it was doubtful that he had picked up

on this sort of language as well: Clark Ensor spoke Clark Ensor, and Felicity Ensor-"Thatcher" (Rosie grumbled internally) didn't seem to speak anything resembling a language. Rosie was expecting the boy to pick up on her body language quickly, but something inside Connor was desperate in its attempt to remain unilingual.

If you're going to look after me, you could at least speak the language, it seemed to say. Here's lesson number one.

In the same moment that Rosie was sitting down to her bowl of chili, Connor lunged for his and held it over his head, letting out a loud series of whoops and growls. Rosie stood up and grabbed at the bowl, but he pulled it out of the way. He jumped with one quick leap and landed on his feet on top of the table, splashing drop after spicy hot drop of Sizzlin' Larry's Six-Alarm Chili Variant on the table, the chandelier, the floor.

"Get down this instant!" Rosie said, fumbling behind her for the silverware drawer.

"I AM THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES!" The room seemed to tremble slightly, and in a nearby pond, a clutch of tadpoles sprouted five legs. *"I AM THE CREATION OF YOUR FOULEST DREAMS, YOUR MOST INSIDIOUS MYTHOLOGIES!"*

"You are in big trouble, mister!" Rosie found what she was looking for: the wooden spoon.

"I SHALL TEACH YOU OF THE NATURE OF TROUBLE, AND I SHALL INFORM YOU OF THE INSIDIOUS MACHINATIONS OF THE OTHERWORLD!"

"You shall get down!" She stood up, brandishing the wooden spoon in her right hand.

"GRRRLRHRHGHGHGH!" And he hurled the bowl of Sizzlin' Larry's Six Alarm Chili Variant at Rusty. The cat squealed as the smoking soup covered his fur and skin, the loudest noise Rosie had ever heard the cat make. The bowl flew past and shattered against the far wall. Red goop and porcelain were everywhere: the floor, the wall, the cat, the tuna, the water dish.

Connor dropped down to his haunches and sniffed the air, chuckling darkly. Rusty tried to lick the chili on his paw, reeled at its spiciness, looked at the red stuff, licked at the paw anyway, reeled again. A black bean floated to the top of the water dish, spun in a circle, and got bored. Rosie stood up, spoon in hand, and yanked Connor from the table with her off hand.

"Down!" she shouted. Connor's eyes twitched inside their sockets as they stared up into hers.

"It has begun!" The light bulb flickered just a bit.
"The war is here! All will know! The ignorant will be informed, and the resistant will be destroyed!"

"Don't your mom and pop ever spank you?" she snapped.

"And again you bore me with trivialities! Do you not see the sky turning to blood and falling to the ground as sackcloth? Do you not see those who have been denied rising like a new dark sun about the land? Do you not—"

"Hush!" Rosie barked, and with a quick flick of her wrist, she snapped the flat end of the spoon against Connor's rear end. Twice. Three times.

There comes a moment, perhaps at a party, when everything seems to go silent for just a second. It's as if everyone becomes tired of talking at once, just at a moment between songs on the radio, and the silent is thick, lumpy, and bizarre, like a gravy with too much corn starch. It only lasts for a moment, since films have made human mortals deathly afraid of silence. These are the moments, after all, when killers burst in through windows and start shooting up the place.

At the snap of the wooden spoon against Connor's ass, this sort of silence gripped most of northern Kentucky—a silence only understood as an awkward pause pretty much everywhere. A moment later, it was gone, and no one felt

compelled to think anything more of it except for the creature inside Connor who had started it all.

"This... this will not be forgotten."

A 100-year-old tree fell sick and died—from a cold.

"It certainly will not," Rosie said, meaning something different.

"You will be made to suffer for this."

A cheeseburger flipped over on its own when no one was looking.

"Go ahead. Your parents should know that this is the sort of discipline I give out," Rosie said, again meaning something different.

"My thoughts shall be consumed by nothing but vengeance."

Nothing happened this time, but the universe thought it was a little awkward that nothing did happen.

"That's fine," Rosie said. "Do it in the guest bedroom." She pointed to a door at the far end of the hall on the left, just next to the bathroom.

Connor sneered. His sneer turned to a smirk. His smirk turned to a grin. His grin turned to a chuckle. His chuckle turned to wild, uncaged laughter.

"March!" Rosie said, making an extra thrust with her pointing finger.

And Connor marched—left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, perfect military rhythm. A few minutes later, he opened the door and slammed it behind him. The laughter continued for a second or twenty, and then it was gone. Connor started snoring.

Rosie walked back in the kitchen and returned the wooden spoon to the drawer. She picked Rusty up with both hands and placed him in the sink; as usual, the cat didn't struggle when it was time for a bath. She ran warm water over the cat, which turned dark red and ran down the sink beneath the cat, beans and beef and tomatoes sliding into the garbage disposal.

"He's such a smart boy," she said to herself. "I just wish I could find a way to reach him." She sighed and closed her eyes. "Lord, please, if there's a way that I can minister this boy, please, show it to me."

At that moment, as if God was tapping her on the shoulder and saying, "Holy crap, do you see that?" Rosie turned around. Rusty's picture stared back at her with that big grin, with that lateral incisor on the bottom row providing a window into his mouth. The eyes on the picture seemed turned down a bit, past the orange flecks of skin under his nose, past his flannel shirt, past the picture

frame, past the wall. Rusty seemed to be looking at the piano.

Rosie turned back to the cat and started scrubbing away with newfound enthusiasm. "Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you! I will! I will!" Rusty the cat lay down in the sink and let the water rush up under his stomach. He purred contentedly.

VI: ATLAS'S CAT

Atlas woke up on his black couch again with another pounding headache and wondered for about a minute or so what woke him up and whether or not he had a bed. In the next minute, Atlas heard his cat meowing and scratching away at a closet door.

So Atlas pulled himself up with a groan, having no real idea how he ended up on the couch to begin with. He had a feeling it usually went like this, with the cat waking him up by scratching away at something. Or were there microwaves? Video games? TVs? Atlas was certain he had woken up before. Somewhere in a closet in the back of his brain, a skeleton dropped a box of files and his coffee.

His legs and crotch ached as he stumbled out to the hallway to find the cat on her back paws, trying her best to manipulate the door knobs. Atlas tried to remember what was in this closet, whether it was the broom closet with the broom leaning conspicuously close to the furnace (had his landlord told him to move it?) or the closet where he

kept his coat and an old computer box that he thought he used to move furniture. Sometimes, Atlas had a hard time remembering which door was what—it'd sometimes take him three tries to find the bathroom.

(*Three tries?* Atlas thought it was three tries. A skeleton tripped and dropped his tibia behind a desk that was far too heavy to move.)

"In a second," Atlas murmured, kicking the cat aside with his left foot. She backed up and lay down with her head low as if she was waiting to pounce, but she reconsidered and just tried to get comfortable on the cold, cracked linoleum. Atlas opened the door.

Almost immediately he was knocked in the head with a broomstick, but he didn't notice. He was too busy staring at the giant stuffed copy of his own cat.

It was a remarkable likeness, right down to the oversized paunch dangling at her belly, the way her blue eyes sparkled with that hint of intelligence, the way her fur tended to stick up in sort of a mohawk because of the way she rubbed against things. The only striking physical difference was the fact that Atlas's cat didn't have the words "WILL YOU PLEASE SLOW DOWN, THINK, AND LISTEN TO YOUR DAMN CAT?" in huge orange letters on her side.

Atlas gawked at the feline facsimile staring back at him with blue eyes the size of ping pong balls. He first tried to figure out where he'd bought it: had he won it a carnival? Was some fair giving out oversized versions of his own cat with orders on the side in huge letters (and with *swears*, no less?)? Had he had it specially made somewhere? Had someone given it to him as a gift? What would he do with it now? And why had the words "Listen to your cat" resonated so clearly?

Atlas's cat hissed. He took it as a sign to consider a different train of thought and sat down on the linoleum, pulling the huge cat into his arms.

"I can't be crazy," he said aloud—a fine place to begin, he thought, a disclaimer that, in its absence, would've rendered the rest of his thoughts moot. Still, it was helpful to hear himself say it. "Okay, maybe I am crazy." This was less reassuring. "Whatever." He looked down at his cat and held her by the face, staring into her eyes. "Okay, I'm listening. Tell me what you want. You want food? You want me to clean your litter box? What?"

The cat pushed its way out of his arms and padded off to the kitchen, and Atlas followed. He found her on top of the counter and pawing at a drawer, which he popped open to

find a pad of paper and an old paint set. The cat looked down at them, then back up at Atlas. She purred.

"What?" he said. "You want me to paint?"

She shook her head.

"You want to paint?"

She purred.

"How can you paint?"

The cat made a motion with her paw that indicated toward the floor. Atlas, with his ticket checked, was already on the crazy train anyway. Still, something seemed right. A skeleton in Atlas's mind found a stack of papers and began arranging them.

Atlas laid the paper and the paint on the ground, opening each individual container until he found out that the blue was the only color not dry. When he opened it, the cat's paw was already in it.

"No!" he felt like he should shout, and he did. The cat only glared at him, motioned back at the stuffed cat in the hallway, and continued dampening her paw. Atlas sat down on the floor, defeated. "Fine. Whatever. But I'm putting you under if this doesn't start making sen—"

He stopped when he noticed what the cat was doing. The piece of paper, which was blank before, now read, in

unmistakable English and dark blue paint, *HUMAN AGAIN PLEASE.*

It wasn't eloquent, but it was definitely English. So Atlas went along with it. "Fine. My cat can write in English and thinks she's a human. What do you want me to do about it?"

Her paws were at work again. She wrote one word beneath her previous statement, and Atlas looked it over, struggling for significance. He didn't need to struggle long.

"Dismiss?"

A light went on in the skeletons' office as the word "dismiss" triggered something. A file with the word "DISMISS" written on it turned up and changed hands, each skeleton flipping through it and reveling in the sense the interior of the file made. When it made its way to the supervisor, he glanced over it, nodded his approval, and stamped it. A few unused synapses in a lost and ramshackle Atlas's mind fired blue electricity into a forgotten node, which sputtered for a moment before firing to life. The word "dismiss" shot through like an injection of epinephrine, and the node began to hum, then to sing, then to take action.

Atlas felt his headache transform from basic hangover to cerebellum jackhammer. A moment later, where his cat was lying, a Japanese woman in blue jeans and a white T-shirt, holding a brown satchel, was lying on the cold ground, looking more than a little bit perturbed, blue paint on her right hand.

VII: PERRY COMO

Just before Connor knocked at the door, Rosie had poured a glass of lemonade with two ice cubes, just the way her husband liked it. As she poured, she prayed.

"Lord, bless this glass Connor is about to receive, and bless our meeting today, that I may glorify Your name in all I do. Amen." With the lemonade blessed, Rosie perked up. She had already forgotten the events of the week before while visions of "Love your neighbor!" danced in the Spirit in her head. She laid the lemonade on a coaster on top of the piano, looked up at Rusty's picture, and winked.

"We'll get 'im today, honey," she whispered.

Before she could reach for the door, the knob was already turning, and Connor was inside. Rosie looked down at him as he stared back up at her with an exaggerated, toothy grin spreading across his face. The old woman looked down at his collared shirt, the PSP sticking out the top of the lapel pocket as if it was a tongue sticking out at her.

"No Nintendo games today?"

"No."

A snake under a nearby yard laughed quietly like it remembered something a coworker had said the night before.

"Well!" Rosie said with a flourish. "Glad to see you're coming around, Connor!" She sat down at the piano bench and pulled back the lid, revealing a yellowing row of wooden white keys and chipped-paint black keys. It was the sort of keyboard that had never left a home but had been farther than most people ever go in their lives. If this keyboard could tell stories, it would probably ramble on for hours about boring memories and people it could only remember as "Bob and Lisa's boy" or "Mrs. Gray's sister, and while the guest excused himself to use the restroom without the intent of coming back out, the keyboard would keep going on and on until it fell asleep and the guest sighed a much-needed "Thank God" before slipping out the side door unnoticed, wondering why it had bothered to get the keyboard started.

The keyboard was, in short, a lot like Rosie Roth: well-loved, well cared for, and with nothing to do but sit there reminiscing.

"I'd like to show you something today, Connor," Rosie said, running her fingers across the white keys. "You play?"

Connor glared at Rosie, muttering something in a language Rosie didn't understand—probably something from central Africa. Somehow, atop the muttering, he still managed to speak. *"You ask a creature of infinite darkness... if it plays the piano. You ask a creature older than time itself, with more cruelty in its time than most humans can even begin comprehending without going mad... if it plays the piano."*

Rosie tittered. "Well, nobody's perfect, Connor!" She scooted over and patted the seat on the bench next to her.

Connor looked at the seat. His eyes burned white fire. Then, a moment later, he laughed, a laugh so dark that a squirrel in the yard went blind (but no one notices, as you may have observed in your time, when squirrels go blind). *"Of course, Mrs..... Roth. I shall grant you this final request. I shall allow you to teach me the piano."*

Rosie clapped her hands together. "Wonderful!"

"And then I shall destroy you."

"Not before we talk about Mr. Mozart, please!" Rosie chuckled.

Connor looked at the lemonade. Whatever creature was taking up residence in his mind gave an imperious smirk. *"Is that mine?"*

"Course it is!" Rosie replied with an anxious nod. "Learning piano's hard work! Don't want you to get thirsty now!"

With one hand, Connor picked up the lemonade, and with the other, he felt the moisture on the glass. A bit of steam rose from the droplets forming on the side. "*Lemonade and piano lessons.*" Connor raised a mock toast with a sneer. "*Here's to suburban living.*" And he drank.

That is to say, he tried to drink.

The moment the first drop of lemonade touched Connor's tongue, steam rose from the spot. Connor screamed like a cat dipped in sulfuric acid, throwing the glass to the ground, and the lemonade splashed onto his pants leg. Connor screamed again, this time like a bear putting its testicles through a meat grinder. His head spun in a full circle, and he began stammering in a dead language from South America.

"Oh, I'm sorry! You aren't allergic, are you?" Rosie said. She motioned to place a hand on Connor's shoulder, but he jumped back. When he did, he collided with Rosie's couch, tripped, and fell forward, his face landing in the spilt lemonade. He screamed again, although this scream was a bit more difficult to describe to most mortal human beings. The easiest description would be, "He screamed like

the Chimera stubbing its toe while learning that its girlfriend had just gotten pregnant," and it would be fully apt—even more so than the previous similes. Unfortunately, that such poetics would be lost on the majority of this crowd's audience, but for those of you who have seen the Chimera, you all probably know exactly what I'm talking about.

To the rest of you—he screamed like a banshee (I apologize to those who have actually heard the scream of a banshee; you may disregard this simile.).

Rosie knelt down next to Connor and patted him on the back. He twitched and writhed for a moment before Rosie rolled him onto his back. His eyes were rolled back in his head, he was stuttering a delicious recipe for duck à l'orange in Esperanto, and his face was pale as a ghost (though not a *real* ghost).

"I'm so sorry, dear," Rosie said. "I had no idea. If I'd known you were allergic to lemonade, I would've—"

"What... did you put... in the lemonade?" Connor was still stuttering.

Rosie closed her eyes in deep thought. "Water, sugar—actual sugar, not that fake sugar—Country Time lemonade mix, two ice cubes, and—and—and the love of the Lord?"

Connor's jaw stopped moving. His eyes opened slowly, furiously. "*I am not familiar with this ingredient.*"

"Well, it's real simple," Rosie said, wondering why *this* should be such a big deal. "I just say a little prayer over the lemonade before I—"

"GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAALLL!" Connor kicked up and was on his feet, looking down at Rosie. His shoulders were rising and falling like a bellows. "*BITCH! HOW DARE YOU!*"

"Now wait just one cotton-picking minute!" Rosie said. She braced herself on the piano bench and pulled herself up. "All I'm trying to do is bring a little of the love of Jesus in your life! There ain't no reason for you to get so upset about it, and there definitely ain't no reason to swear!"

"*YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!*" Outside, a frog burped, and that was all. Something was wrong with the voice—it was no quieter, but it was less self-assured than normal. Its confidence in its ability to perform its mission was starting to fade away, and a few nagging voices inside of it were telling it that maybe this *wasn't* the best idea after all. What was living inside Connor's head was a combination of a number of different—"things," to use an English colloquialism, and several of these elements were now wrestling over the controls.

All Rosie noticed was that Connor's head twitched and that he turned for the kitchen.

"Towels are in the top-right drawer near the sink!" Rosie called after him. "Bring a towel and a wet dish rag back with you!"

Rosie dropped back onto the bench with a sigh. Just a moment ago, she and Connor had been getting along so well, it seemed. If nothing else, he was anxious to start playing the piano. What went wrong here? Was it that silly lemonade allergy, something that he should've known to tell her about in the first place? Were Connor's parents so bad that they hadn't even taught him to speak up when something was wrong? A few dark thoughts sped through Rosie's mind before being swallowed by the ever-present "Love thy neighbor!" Rosie felt a sensation that many people recognize as the need for a drink, but she just thought she was upset.

She looked up at Rusty's picture, which seemed to look back down at her. "I'm not doing well, am I?" she said. Rusty looked back, still grinning. The good thing about this picture was that it could never once look disapproving. She looked around for Rusty the cat and, assuming he was asleep in her bedroom, found no disapproving eye. Her smile came back again.

"This one's for you then, Rusty," she said, looking back down at the piano. "Perry Como, your favorite."

She cracked her knuckles so loudly that she didn't hear Connor return from the kitchen with no towel and no rag. He held a bottle of rubbing alcohol from under the kitchen sink in one hand and a grill lighter in the other.

Rosie made sure everything was in tune first-C scale up and down, then up to D flat, then up to D, then up to E flat, and so forth. Connor slowly advanced with somber self-importance.

"Connor, dear!" she called to the kitchen without looking up. "Here's a song my husband and I used to like when we were kids. Hope you like it!" Connor unscrewed the lid on the alcohol and threw it on the ground. The liquid inside sloshed steadily with his slow pace.

Rosie hit middle C a few more times just to make sure she wasn't rusty. She played the first three notes of the scale, then back down, then back up again, singing quietly. "Do-Re-Mi-Re-Do. Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Mi-Re-Do. Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-Fa-Mi-Re-Do." Connor pressed the button on the lighter, and a small orange flame flared up.

His somber look turned to a menacing grin. Something inside him laughed.

Rosie played middle C. Then G. Then G again. Then low G. Then C. She played the pattern again with a staccato grace, like a tap dancer on landmines.

Connor slowed down.

All at once, the song sprang to life—the same pattern of fourths and fifths, but with just the right chords and grace notes to make the whole piece sound somehow more alive.

“Catch a fallin’ star and put it in your pock-et, never let it faaaade away!” Rosie sang—a scratchy, loud, squeaking, high-pitched voice and an entirely unpleasant one, like two cats fighting. Her rhythm and pitch were perfect, but the tonality was dead on arrival.

Connor stopped. He dropped the lighter. The fire flickered out.

“Catch a fallin’ star and put it in your pock-et, save it for a raaaainy day!” She modulated flawlessly and sang horribly.

Connor was in a dead stop. Inside him, something pushed aside whatever force was primary within, gave it the finger, and told it to shove off. Connor’s eyebrows turned up, and his grin was as sunny as the day Rosie and Rusty got married—in short, very.

"Fooooooooooor loooooove may coooooooooome and tap you on the shoooooooooulder some starless night!" He sang splendidly, in a deep tenor lower than most boys his age could ever hope to reach. Rosie looked up for a moment, nodded, and kept singing—he on harmony, she on melody.

"Juuuuuust in caaaaaaaase you feeeeeel you wanna hooooooooooooold her..."

She offered a pause in the music here, and Connor didn't miss his cue. "Yooooou'll have a PAH-cket full of staaaaaaaaaarlight!"

And so it was that Rosie saw Connor offer his first genuine bit of happiness since the two had met over hot tea and broken coasters. He sang like a pro, and she sang like the Chimera in heat (The Chronicler apologizes to those who may be unfamiliar with the mating practices of the Chimera and assures them that they're not missing much—not much *pleasant* anyway.), but it didn't matter; they *sang*. They *harmonized*. They picked up on each other's cues as if they had known each other for years, when they'd only known each other for a week and a half.

Rosie finished with a soft major C chord, looked up at Connor, and nodded. "Good. That was good."

But Connor looked tired for some reason—in fact, he looked as if he'd just been woken up from the only hour of

sleep he planned to make time for in his entire life. There was something different about him now, but Rosie couldn't pin it down precisely. The viciousness had gone, but so had the life he'd had just a second ago. He looked as if he'd already forgotten the words to the song he'd just been singing with her.

"My husband and I used to sing that song to each other," she said. She leaned her head back wistfully and sighed slowly; if there was a tropical breeze blowing in that room at that moment, she wouldn't have thought it odd. "That man could sing like nobody you ever heard before. My son, too—oh, Gary can still sing with the best of 'em!" She took in a slow lungful of air through her nose, held it for longer than she knew, and let it go.

"Mrs. Roth?" Connor said drowsily. His voice sounded a little higher than normal.

"Rosie, sweetie," she said. "Call me Rosie."

"Do you mind if I go lay down?"

Rosie sat up and patted Connor's shoulder, her face fraught with concern. "Of course, dear. Are you feeling okay?"

"I think I'm gonna haaaaahba daaaaaaaaaahba...." Connor's words were swallowed in a yawn. "Take a nap."

"You go right ahead," Rosie said, pointing back to the back bedroom. "You just holler if you need anything, okay?"

Connor nodded, turned, started back to the bedroom with a zombie saunter.

"Oh, Connor?"

He turned his head to see Rosie standing over him, smiling.

"If you ever want me to play for you again, I'd love to."

His eyes lit up, his voice filled with an enthusiasm he'd lost when he stopped singing. "Sounds good. Thanks."

As Connor ambled back to the guest bedroom, Rosie felt herself tearing up. She recalled when Gary, the oldest of the triplets, was growing up, singing Perry Como and "I'll Fly Away" while Rosie played the piano, while Barry clapped along, while Larry cooked chili in the kitchen, while Rusty sat on the couch with that big ever-so-slightly-toothless grin on his ever-so-slightly-orange-patched face. All at once, everything was good again.

VIII: SORANO

To the best of his knowledge (and it is worth noting that the best of his knowledge isn't necessarily the best of everyone else's), Atlas had never seen a cat turn into a human being in his hallway. Or in his apartment. Or in his *life*. So when his cat of so many years (How many years? What was her name again?) transformed into a Japanese woman on his hallway floor, he did what any reasonable human being would do, given the circumstances. He put on a pot of coffee.

At least, that's what the woman told him the reasonable thing to do was.

"No decaf," she said, her voice low and filled with a sense of bored urgency. "Caffeine is your friend right now. In fact, do you have anything with *extra* caffeine?"

Atlas was sure he didn't, but he checked the cupboard anyway. The way things were going today, he wouldn't be surprised if there was a block of solid caffeine with the words "LISTEN TO YOUR GOD-DAMNED CAT" etched on it. "No.

Doesn't matter anyway. The regular, non-super coffee is almost done."

"You could pour an energy drink into it," she suggested. "Do you have any energy drinks?"

Atlas checked the fridge. "No."

"Soda?"

"No."

"Sugar?"

Atlas checked on top of the fridge. "Yeah."

"Put as much in it as you can stand," she said. "We have a lot to discuss."

Atlas poured two cups of coffee. "So I'm just going to assume that I should listen to what you have to say?"

The woman didn't flinch. "Not half an hour ago, I was your cat. Something tells me you're going to want to listen to what I have to say. No sugar in mine, thanks."

Atlas considered all this and decided she was right. "Okay then. You have my ear. Can I at least know who I'm talking to first?"

"You can call me Sorano," she said. "It's not my real name, but it's the one you need to call me right now. Thanks." She took the coffee cup that Atlas had just placed in front of her to her lips and blew, adjusting herself in

Atlas's uncomfortable hard steel kitchen chair. "Do you remember your name?"

Even though he knew the answer, Atlas was shocked at how appropriate that question seemed at the time. "Atlas Robinson?"

She chuckled, revealing a row of unbrushed, slightly yellow teeth. Atlas wretched a bit. "Close enough. It seems like you got your cover identity and your real name twisted together, but that'll do for now. Atlas Robinson it is."

There was a pause as she took a slow sip of coffee. Atlas looked her over, with her fussed black hair and wrinkles under her eyes. Atlas guessed that she was in her mid-30's—obviously a few years older than him, without a doubt. "So you're from Japan then?" he said. He took a sip of his coffee, realized how much sugar he had put in it, and jolted his head back. A second later, he realized that he'd probably better drink up and took an oversized gulp. His head jolted back again.

"Indianapolis," Sorano said. "My real name is Emily, but that's not important. The important thing is that we've got to get your head back to where it was, so drink."

Atlas drank. "And where was my head exactly?"

"In the Clouds."

"In that case, I think it's been back there for quite some time."

Sorano huffed and slammed her coffee on the table, narrowing her eyes. "The Atlantean Clouds, the secret society of the Psi-Gifted that is in a perpetual war with the Armor-Beasts of the Far Galaxy."

Atlas paused, then took an even bigger gulp of his coffee than before. He was starting to feel a little bit wired, like parts of his mind that had been out of use for some time were firing to life. "Yes, those are certainly words you've managed to put together in a sequence there."

Sorano huffed again. "Dammit, Atlas, you're in too much trouble to be this much of a smart-ass!"

"Trouble?" Atlas shouted, with more enthusiasm than he'd shown in quite some time. He slammed his coffee down on the table and pointed at Sorano as if accusing her of witchcraft. "Before you decided to suddenly appear in place of my cat in my hallway, I didn't get into any trouble! All I did was sit around, watch TV, eat, feed my cat—uh, feed you anyway—and play video games! I was completely innocent before you showed up!"

Sorano stared back at Atlas. Then, a moment later, she smiled. "Good, the stimulants are starting to work." She

zipped open her satchel and busied herself with its contents.

Atlas gasped. "You're not even *listening* to me, are you, lady? Did you just come here to confuse me?"

"I didn't come here," she muttered. "You brought me here."

"I *brought* you here!?" he screamed. "You took over my cat-or-or something! How did I bring you here?"

"You dismissed the curse you put on me." Sorano produced a small silver disc that looked exactly like a nickel from her satchel and began looking at it in the light, sticking her tongue out and closing one eye as if that made the studying easier.

"Do you pride yourself on making less sense every time you say a damn sentence!?" Atlas shrieked, and his voice was now so loud that the room seemed to be shaking. "What the hell is wrong with me!? How the hell did you get here!? Why in the hell should I-!?"

It was at that moment that Sorano stood up and thrust the disc against Atlas's forehead. Before he could even open his mouth to protest, the world disappeared in a blur of purple, green, and bleach-white confusion.

When Atlas's eyes opened, he found himself swimming but neither drowning nor wet. He felt like an incredible weight had fallen right onto his shoulders, and he was stroking to reach the top of it, pulling himself higher and higher. He was in darkness but not real darkness—more of a dim mood light, like a light bulb trying to shine through a sheet of paper. When he reached the surface of the weight, he realized why.

He burst out of a huge stack of papers to find himself in a plain white room with a single flickering light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

Atlas perused the room slowly, starting with his location. The mound of papers seemed to be roughly ten times his own height but may have gone much deeper, since Atlas found his depth perception more than a little skewed in this odd location. The papers all had writing on them, though a few also had pictures—of homes, people, odd-looking white horses with condor wings—all of them laced with an odd twinge of familiarity. A few of the papers were burnt or seemed to have water damage, while still others were torn or had ink spilled on them. A few dumped-out folders were also strewn among the mix.

The smooth concrete floor under the files seemed to extend about twenty feet each way before it hit the plain

white walls, which were smooth, but not in the same way a painted wall, a sanded bench, or (to use a particularly odd mortal human idiom) a baby's rear end. These were perfectly smooth, disturbingly smooth, so smooth that they would destroy the mind of a mortal human witnessing them. It's very fortunate that no mortal humans ever do see them.

Lining the terrifyingly smooth walls were four long rows of filing cabinets, one row along each row, each cabinet a shade of beige that was roughly 3.8% less disturbing than the smoothness of the walls. And wandering around these cabinets, opening drawers and putting papers from the pile inside, were Sorano and a crack team of skeletal clerks.

"Hey!" Atlas called, and his voice echoed surprisingly far. "Hey!"

Sorano looked up at him and waved anxiously, pointing to the ground beside her.

"You want me to jump!?"

She nodded and returned to flipping through the files.

"You've got to be kidding!" he shouted, looking down. "It's gotta be..." He counted, estimated his own height, looked down, counted again, estimated his own height again, estimated the fall again, counted again. "...well, I can't

really tell how far it's gotta be, but it's gotta be far, okay! Are you trying to kill me?"

Sorano shook her head and pointed to the ground beside her again, much more forcefully this time.

Atlas sighed. Although something inside him was telling him that he wouldn't die, a still small voice that reminded him that he was still human was growing more agitated and larger, telling him that no mortal human could jump from this high (however high it was) and suffer less than a broken leg. At least.

Still, in the end, the part of him that wanted to continue to lean back and plummet down the water slide to madness won out, and he jumped.

There was nothing graceful about the jump—he stumbled mostly, and a fraction of a second later he found that he was falling face first toward the approaching concrete. It grew closer and closer, speeding toward its face with a cold, silent fury. Internally, Atlas sighed and was glad to see it all over.

A moment later, he was standing on his own feet next to Sorano, who still wasn't turning around.

Atlas clapped his hands to his chest, checking to make sure his entire body was still intact. He was both amazed

and disappointed to find it all there. "How-how did that not kill me?"

"Because you can't die in here," Sorano said. "You're not really in here." She sighed. "Well, not *physically* anyway. Psychologically, this is all pretty much you."

Atlas didn't think that made a damn bit of sense, and he said so.

"This, Atlas, is the inside of your mind."

Atlas nodded. Somehow, that made much more sense.

"Every living creature has a room like this," she said. "Among the Atlantean Clouds, we call it the Psi-Room. It's a semi-physical space that contains the store of all of your knowledge, talents, personality traits, and memories. This is how we—and you, for a good while there—access people's minds."

Atlas nodded again. "Yes, that would explain the wreck." A moment later, Atlas jumped as he felt something cold brush against his arm, and as he whipped around, he saw a skeleton pass. "So what's with these guys?"

"They're your staff," she said. "Not many people have them—only those with psychic abilities do. They help keep things straightened up, help you access your psychic abilities."

"Well, they don't seem to be doing a very good job, eh?" Atlas said, motioning to the pile of papers. Sorano didn't turn around. "Eh? Aren't doing a good job?" It was obvious that Sorano didn't think it was funny.

"So you're not even going to ask about the other part of what I said?"

Atlas blinked. "What part?"

"The part about the psychic abilities."

"Oh, that." He chuckled. "I just assumed you were making that up to screw with me."

"Afraid not," she said. She pulled out a folder that looked important, flipped through it, tucked it under her arm, kept looking. "You have been, for even longer than I have, a member of the Atlantean Clouds."

"It's funny," Atlas said with the same awkward chuckle as before. "You keep using those two words side by side like you expect me to know what they mean." And yet, somehow, when he said those words, Atlas had a feeling he *did* know. Somehow, the inside of his own mind seemed much more familiar than his apartment, with its uncertain rent payment dates and its doors that sometimes led to bathrooms but sometimes didn't. When Sorano mentioned the Atlantean Clouds, he felt like she was mentioning a group of old high school buddies, a fraternity, or a gang of fellow barflies.

The whole affair felt so important to them that he was sure Sorano wasn't screwing with him.

"Fair enough," Sorano said. She didn't look up from her shuffling, and Atlas wasn't yet convinced that she would ever do so. "Every few generations or so, two or three children get born with innate psychic abilities. Basically, they have an extra node in their mind that allows them to manipulate matter and energy in ways other people can't—usually in very specific ways."

"So it's a comic book thing?" Atlas joked. Again, Sorano didn't seem to get it.

"More supernatural than that," she replied. "At least culturally so. This is where a lot of your myths come from. Whole religions get built around this stuff, and frankly, it can be troublesome. It all started to get really troublesome when the Earth got invaded by aliens."

"Ah, so it *is* comic book shit."

"No, it's reality," she said. Sorano began digging around in the stack of papers until she found something she liked. "It's all in here. Have a look."

Atlas looked over her shoulder as she opened the folder up, and just as it had when he'd entered his Psi-Room, the world began to spin again in a blur of colors. When he arrived, he felt somewhere between consciousness

and unconsciousness, watching—from a safe distance—as a group of hulking brown monsters marched across a grassy plain in southern Europe. They were vaguely gorilla-like but shimmered with a silver-white sheen as they crashed over the civilizations of Earth, ripping lots of heads off in their path.

"This looks familiar," Atlas heard himself say from everywhere. The hulking brown monsters didn't turn to look at him; they didn't even acknowledge that they had heard him. It was as if they were videotaped.

"It should," Sorano said. "We called these the Armor-Beasts. Not a great name, but it did well. Real nasty buggers. Hey, look, there we are."

As the Armor-Beasts approached what looked like an ocean, a group of soldiers clad in futuristic-looking armor appeared. They began unloading all manner of weaponry into the monsters, felling some of them in their tracks.

"Hey, that's pretty cool," Atlas said. "We had body armor?"

"Absolutely," Sorano replied. "You were a hero, Atlas. It's a shame you don't remember it."

Then, just as quickly as it had began, the video shut down, and Sorano and Atlas were once again standing in the

Psi-Room. Sorano handed the file to a skeleton, who saluted before scampering off to drop it somewhere.

"We fought them for centuries—only recently did we do so in armor. The first wave of aliens landed eons ago on an island in the Mediterranean. They're the ancient offshoot of the Atlantean Clouds of today."

Atlas bit his lower lip. This was all sounding too ridiculous to be true. "And this island, I suppose you want me to believe..."

"Was called Atlantis, yes."

"And the Atlantean Clouds were there..."

"Before the bastards sunk it, yes."

Atlas thought about this. His mind started to panic.

"Believe it if you want to. That's not important," Sorano said, pulling out another file and stuffing it under her arm. "The bottom line is that there are Armor-Beasts and there are the Atlantean Clouds, and you used to be a member of the latter pursuing the former."

Sorano had a huge stack of files under one arm now, and she turned to face Atlas. There was something eerily cold about the way she looked right now, so self-assured in these stories that were so ridiculous that they absolutely *had* to be myths. Atlas, meanwhile, was getting angry.

"Not one hour ago, I was lying on my couch, dreaming," Atlas said, his breaths coming in quick, heaving bursts. "Do you know what I was dreaming about?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I was on a tractor, flying over Chicago, fighting off an army of Richard Nixons who were all riding pterodactyls! And that still made a hell of a lot more sense than anything you've told me in the past ten minutes!" He threw his arms in the air. "If I was in this group, what happened to my mind? If I'm really a psychic, why the hell am I not a psychic right now? How did I end up in some apartment with no memory of *any* of this? How did you end up as a cat, and if you're so damned powerful, why didn't you change back? Why have you been wasting my time with this—this *bullshit* if you have no intent of explaining it!?"

Atlas had been holding his breath for the entirety of this rant, and although he seemed to want to go on, his lungs gave out and he had to breathe in—an odd reaction for a psychic projection of a man's physical body, but again, one of the little ways in which he tried to assure himself that he was still a mortal human. Sorano, meanwhile, was still standing, still calm, still looking Atlas dead in the eyes.

"Are you done?" she asked.

Atlas breathed in through his nose. "For now, yeah."
He breathed out.

"These are your video games come to life, Atlas," she said. "Why do you think you felt drawn to them? It's because they reminded you of who you used to be. Why do you think people kept telling you to listen to your cat? It's because subconsciously, you wanted it to happen. You're a powerful mentalist, Atlas—that's how we were able to get here in the first place."

"Then how'd you become a cat?" he asked.

"You fell under their control," she said. "Not too long ago, in fact. You turned me into a cat. And then they wiped my brain. And frankly, I'm happy to see you sent off to do some good to make up for all the crap you put me through."

"Like what?"

"Have you ever eaten dry cat food?"

She had a point.

"It almost makes sense," Atlas said. "And I guess I want to believe you. What happened to the Armor-Beasts?"

"They're probably gone now," she said. "Their move to wipe your memory was one of their final power plays before they left Earth—probably for good. The only threat we have

now are from rogue Psi-Gifted people on Earth, and I have a feeling that's what you'll be dealing with soon."

"Oh, yeah, like you know what I'll be dealing with soon."

Sorano smiled. "I think the Atlantean Clouds have a mission for you."

IX: UPSILON TURQUOISE

Just a few seconds later, a man called Upsilon Turquoise materialized at the bar of a Waffle House.

If you've never seen the sight of an ethereal being suddenly dropping out of the ether and onto a bar stool, it's really something worth observing if you can make the necessary arrangements. Atoms entering the physical plane make a bit of a dull pop, barely audible, like the background harmonics of sizzling eggs. A few sextillion of these dull pops happen over the course of half a second and make a brief noise—like an entire symphony of sizzling eggs—before a potent mystical being drops six inches and lands on a bar stool, disheveled and irritated and maybe slightly confused but perfectly healthy and alive.

The number of places in which one can reasonably complete such an activity and remain within walking distance of civilization are few but increasing. It's possible to appear out of the ether in the midst of civilization, and the numbers of these places are small but growing. The restrooms of restaurants are the best places,

where everyone is too busy keeping their sexual organs from being seen to keep track of comings and goings. It's a rare restaurant where an ethereal being can pop back into the material world at a table or at the bar. This Waffle House was just such a place.

So Upsilon dropped out of the ether onto his bar stool behind the back of the one worker up front, and before she could turn around, he was already halfway through his first cigarette. Parts of his body that most mortals don't know they have (because they don't) ached terribly, and his mind was racing. Literally. It felt like bits and pieces of himself were shoving each other out of the way in a mad dash for control.

"Hash browns," he growled, squinting. He scratched at the dark five o'clock shadow covering his chin and his neck, which was thick and fat and made him look like a hobo frog. "Scattered, smothered, peppered, topped. Quickly. I haven't eaten in months."

The girl at the bar nearest him turned around slowly, a glazed look in her eyes as she wiped off a plate in such a way that can only indicate 3:00 in a restaurant, that time halfway between lunch and dinner when it's too early for the shift change and a ludicrous time to be ordering food, when even Jesus Himself entering the restaurant would

earn a sigh for His troubles. Upsilon Turquoise wasn't Jesus, but he was close enough. The girl ("STELLA," her name tag read) had no idea. He stared deeply into those deep brown eyes, past the contacts, past the pupils, through the interior and out the other side, slipping his senses in between the cavities in her skull. He scanned for something.

"You had a choice and you chose us," she droned. "Thank you for stopping by to—"

"Stick it up your ass," Upsilon muttered. "Hash browns. Scattered, smothered, peppered, topped. And if you spit in it, I'm not just telling your boss. I'm stealing your car."

The girl rolled her eyes, still ceaselessly turning circles over the same spot on the plate that had been clean for hours. "Whatever. You don't even know which—"

Without lifting his head, Upsilon extended a stubby finger toward the parking lot, and his filthy nails indicated in the direction of a bright red Saturn far too expensive for someone on a Waffle House budget. "Your step-dad's not going to be happy if he finds out you're leaving the doors unlocked. It'll be over the side of a mountain by morning, and you can be damn sure that I'll make sure the only thing to survive will be those pictures of your friend

Kristen in the pages of the owner's manual." He leaned forward, eyes wide, still staring straight through her skull. "Were those for science class, kid? Because there sure is a lot of anatomy."

Stella had stopped cleaning, and the plate slid out of her hands and crashed onto the floor. "The-There's—"

"Nothing wrong with it all," Upsilon said with a sneer. "I agree. But your church group doesn't. And neither does your mom. Hell, I daresay she'd be more than happy to have Kristen taken in for statutory, too. It'd be such a nice end to the love story: one exiled from her family, school, and friends; the other, a sexual predator."

Stella was trembling. "You're—you want to ruin my life..."

"Hey, I didn't say I *wanted* to!" Upsilon laughed. "The easiest way around this is to just make me good food. Now. Hash browns. Scattered, smothered, peppered, topped. Make sure the chili and the peppers are fresh." His sneer suddenly turned up, and a look of amazing sincerity crossed his face. "Don't worry. You're not who I'm after. Just do a good job and we'll be okay. Okay?" With that, his demeanor faded, and he began picking away at the bent corner of his placemat-menu with his fingernail. Stella, still trembling, dumped a pile of potatoes onto the griddle and began

perusing the ingredients table, turning over the definition of freshness in her mind for the good of her future.

"They're fine," Upsilon said without looking up, peeling back part of the plastic over a picture of a plate of waffles, then flapping the bent corner back and forth. "So listen, if you get this order right, I hope things work out for you. People can be such bastards, am I right?"

Stella turned around with a cupful of red and green peppers in her shaking right hand. "Well... yeah, I guess they can be."

"Shhhhyeah!" he laughed. He slammed his fist against the counter. "Here's the deal, kid. These people out there, the people who want to tell you what's best for you and how to live your life? They don't have a clue. Not your churches, not your schools, not a single one of 'em. They're all either out for control or for what's best in the short-term. They've got no perspective. You got perspective?" Stella poured the peppers onto the hash browns and began stirring them into the potatoes. "No, you haven't. But that's okay. You're only sixteen, and that's not long enough to have anything resembling perspective. And anyway, you've got all these forces bearing down on you anyway, trying to take a big bite out of your individuality whenever they get the chance. That's no way to live, right?"

"Uh..."

"Right. So you do your thing. Keep this thing with Kristen secret as long as you can. Maybe get out to California or Hawaii or somewhere down the road where the two of you can do what you need to do without all these self-righteous Midwesterners looking over your shoulder and telling you to color within the lines. You do what you gotta do, kid. You do what's best for you and don't let anybody tell you otherwise." Upsilon took a deep breath. Whatever it was that was shoving his mind around had died down, and he felt good enough for the moment.

Stella scattered onions onto the hash browns. "Can I ask you something?"

Upsilon shrugged and put his arms behind his head. The cigarette smoke rose from above his ear. "I can't promise I'll answer."

"Yeah..." Stella flipped the potatoes. "How do you know so much about me?"

Upsilon's voice turned suddenly low. "You can tell a lot about a person if you make eye contact."

"Yeah, but—"

"Shouldn't you get somebody to clean that up? Second shift will be here in an hour."

Stella turned suddenly and found Upsilon's filthy fingernail pointing toward the shattered plate on the floor. She jumped a bit, then turned back to the potatoes, then back to the plate. For a moment she panicked, wondering whether to focus her attention on the hash browns and the sanctity of her life, wondering how serious was this man's demand that the plate be cleaned up. Finally, she managed to stutter.

"A-A-ALICE! Could you bring the broom up here!"

Something about the name made Upsilon's skin crawl. It wasn't as if Alice was an uncommon name, but he still found himself filled with dread for some reason. Then, when the doors to the dish room flew open and the stunning six-foot-seven woman shoved her way in with a broom and dustpan, he knew.

"All right, all right!" Alice said, her disposition as sunny as the day wasn't. "Just hold your horses, Stell! I swear, y'all get so worried about the silliest things!"

Upsilon pulled the placemat over his face, peering over it when he was sure Alice wasn't looking. He gave her a once over, and everything looked familiar. That blonde ponytail nearly to her waist. That hop in her step. That ludicrous height. That spectacular figure. Those eyes, too bright to be gray and too pale to be blue. The only thing

that didn't add up was that thick Georgia accent, but that could be an act.

"What were y'all doing out here that made you drop that plate?" Alice asked, slapping Stella on the shoulder so hard that she nearly face-planted onto the grill. "Gotta be careful, honey. I'd be real upset if you hurt yourself." As Stella sighed and returned to finishing the hash browns, Alice began sweeping up the remains of the plate, looking up to see a placemat standing vertical on the counter. "Oh, hi, hon. I take it Stella here's helped you already?"

Whoever was behind the placemat said nothing, didn't even breathe. Alice took a step towards the counter, her eyebrows raised in concern. "You okay, honey? You need me to get some help?"

Alice peeked over the other side of the placemat to find a single napkin holder keeping it in place and an empty bar stool. She peered over the counter as far as she could and saw no one, not even a set of dusty footprints crossing the floor.

"Stella, sweetie, I think your customer left," she said slowly, her mind shifting through possibilities. Whoever it was must have hidden himself quickly and escaped through the door—somehow without jingling the bell. She

narrowed her eyes, sighed, and returned to her sweeping, still wearing something resembling the smile on her face.

Stella, meanwhile, dropped the hash browns on another plate in case the man came back. Instinctively, she reached into her pocket for the keyless entry remote on her car and pressed the lock button. She didn't think it'd help, but it felt good to see those headlights flash anyway.

X: FATHER RYNE O'MALLEY

Atlas was on a bus to Kentucky and glad he remembered how he had gotten there.

It was a strange feeling, being so far from his apartment, the gap between his body and his things growing with each moment the bus sped north along Interstate 75. He had a feeling it was supposed to be a good thing; people left their houses, after all, and people went far away sometimes. But at home, nothing happening also meant nothing terrible happening. The feeling that this wasn't necessarily the case never thought to pass his mind.

"The power of Christ compels ye," he said quietly, trying to nail an Irish accent. He didn't like it, but Sorano had told him that Irish was the world's most trustworthy accent, as it was the dialect of kindly police officers, big-hearted matrons, and leprechauns. "The power of *Christ* compels ye. *The power of Christ compels ye!*"

The haircut was nice, he thought—seeing the long hair hit the bathroom floor for the clockwork buzz cut he now wore made him think of shedding an old skin. Shaving that

thick beard and that huge Fu Manchu moustache should've occurred to him a long time ago and he didn't remember why it hadn't. But the hair was nice anyway and made him feel cool. The black priestly vestments and white collar he could do without, though.

"I cast ye out, noxious vermin, by God the Father almighty, by Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, and by the Holy Spirit" he said, crossing himself. "I cast ye out, noxious vermin! I *cast ye out, noxious vermin!*"

Sorano had told him the parts verbatim. She'd given him a cover identity. She'd somehow materialized a priest's outfit from a closet that Atlas was sure had no such outfit in it. She'd given him his crucifix, his holy water, his copy of *De Exorcismis et Supplicationibus Quibusdam*. She'd given him a five-minute crash course in Latin pronunciations that came so easily that Atlas had wondered if he'd known it in another life. She'd given him an address she'd found off the Internet, a bus fare, and a schedule. She'd given him a script to follow. She'd given him directions to a Waffle House where he could find help if he needed it. She'd given him the explicit advice not to need help.

"Noxious vermin!" That was fun to say with the accent.

Most importantly, she'd given him a chance to do something good—to do *something* to make up for all the nothing he'd made himself do.

"Noxious vermin!"

"Hey, buddy!"

Atlas looked up from his trance to find the bus stopped and the bus driver staring at him. He had a fat face and was wearing one of those caps that he was sure bus drivers only wore in old cartoons. As he turned, he found every passenger—an eight-year-old girl, her mother, and a scruffy man who smelled like a gas station restroom on a bad day.

"Who're you calling vermin?" The bus wasn't moving.

Atlas tugged at his priest's collar. His hand jumped immediately to the crucifix around his neck, and as he ran his fingers over Christ's broken body, he struggled for an answer.

"Gah," he said. That wasn't it.

"Buh?" he tried. No, that wasn't it either.

"Rehearsing for a play."

The bus driver narrowed his eyes before turning back to the road. This explanation seemed good enough, but the bus continued not to move—they were, as it turned out, at a

red light, on a northern Kentucky exit toward some place called Mt. Ararat and another called Bailey.

He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and worked on his lines in his head.

It was Sunday morning at the Roth house on Cramwood Drive, that little suburban slice of apple pie seven or eight minutes from the Interstate, and Rosie was playing a song from her piano book, *301 Songs for Students of the Piano*, called "Blowin' in the Wind." Some fellow named Bob that she'd never heard of before had written it. It was a nice song, though; she imagined Bob as a handsome young man in a nice tie and well-pressed black pants, a man quick with a joke and a smile. She always played the song a little faster than the required tempo and howled out whatever words she could think of: "I praise the Lord for his grace and love! Oh, I praise the Lord for his love!" became the verse, and "And someday, O Lord, I'll meet you in the sky! Lord, someday I'll meet you in the sky!" became her refrain. Rusty looked down from the wall picture with such a smile on his face that Rosie was sure he'd join in soon.

"Connor!" she shouted, her fingers still two-stepping across the keyboard. "You just about ready for chuch?" A drowsy reply slumped out of the room, and Rosie stopped

playing and chuckled. "You're gonna have to learn to speak up if you're gonna make it in the Lord's house! Now are you ready?"

"YES!" This time the reply made Rosie's ears ring. Her head was still reeling when Connor returned to the room in a powder yellow suit jacket with a flared lapel, a frilly white undershirt, and well-pressed matching pants that smelled so strongly like mothballs that his nose seemed frozen mid-wince. Connor tugged at the collar like it was a boa strangling him, and he played with the clip on the back of the bright red bow tie with the knowledge that it couldn't well strangle him at all.

"You look so handsome!" Rosie said with a giggle.

"I look like a..." Connor began. "A..." He tugged his collar. "A..." He shuffled in his shoes. "A..." He rolled his eyes back into his head, then rolled them back forward. "I look stupid."

"Oh, don't be silly!" Rosie said, slicking back his hair as if to force a part from hair that hadn't even thought to try to be parted before. "Why, that's the same suit my little Barry used to wear to church when he was a boy. You look like a little deacon yourself!"

"What's a deacon?"

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough!" Rosie said, throwing her purse over her shoulder and standing up. "Now come along; the Lord's waiting!"

And He was, Rosie was sure of that. She'd managed to convince Mr. Ensor earlier in the week that Connor's soul was in jeopardy, that he was on a fast track to degradation and sin in no time, that if he wasn't in a pew by Sunday then all would be lost. Mr. Ensor had been remarkably open to the idea and had even paid Rosie a little extra on top to keep him busy for most of the day. His wife—at least he said she was his wife—had shown up near the end and reacted. Rosie hadn't been able to gauge the reaction as fear, as anger, or just as hunger—the poor thing looked like she hadn't eaten in days. But it was a reaction, and it was the best she'd seen out of her since they'd met.

But that didn't matter. Connor was hers for the full day, and that meant church in the morning, afternoon lunch, and church in the evening. His soul was as good as God's!

533 Cramwood Drive was nice enough, and Atlas had a feeling that if he knew a little more about architecture, he'd be able to make some kind of assessment of the high arches over the front porch, the high-angled roof, and the half-circle windows on the second floor. But he didn't know

about architecture, so all he could say was that the house was nice enough aside from being the darkest shade of blue he'd ever seen on a house. It was glossy, just the sort of shiny that new cars seemed to be and houses weren't. The lawn was so deep green and cut so short that Atlas was sure it was Astroturf, and the stone walkway leading to the door looked like marble.

He didn't know much about architecture, but he knew an asshole's house when he saw one.

The doorbell gave a deep, hearty ring when he rang it, almost like there was a church bell in the attic. Inside, he could faintly hear some light jazz and people moving. No, not just moving, scrambling. No, not just scrambling, scrambling and swearing.

Atlas couldn't let any of it distract him. He had come for a mission. He ran through the lines in his head. He ran through the pages of the book in his head. He ran through the entire act that he was sure he'd rehearsed with Sorano one time too few.

He ran through all of this in his mind so hard that he ran head-first into the fact that the man who opened the front door was completely naked.

He stood with his left arm propped up against the door and his right hand pressing against the frame, leaning

forward. He smelled like sweat and musk and the black hair on his head was flecked with gray and kept a similar tone all the way down his body. His cool smile that crossed his face offset his flushed expression and made him give the appearance of a man who knew he was naked, a man who had come to realize that minutes ago, a man who didn't care what was spotted, a man who—rightfully so—had no shame in whatever was hanging out.

Somewhere in the background, a woman was laughing her ass off. Atlas wondered if she would be walking to the door naked, too.

"Is there a problem, Father?"

Atlas blinked. He blinked again. He shook his head. "Uh, prob... lem?"

The man nodded. "Y'know, if we're being too loud about here, we can finish up a little quicker. We were almost done anyway."

"Almost... done." Atlas grimaced. He had forgotten his lines. "No... no, that's not the—" Then, in a flash of prescience, he remembered his lines again, putting on the best Irish accent he could manage. "Ah, top o' the morning to ye, Mr.... Ensor, is that correct?"

The man's eyes furrowed. "Yes, Clark Ensor. You're—"

"Father Ryne O'Malley, sir, and a pleasure it is to see ye this fine morn!" Atlas extended a hand for a moment before realizing he didn't feel like shaking anything that was being presented, so he dropped it to his side.

"Yeah, great," Clark said. "But you weren't Irish a second ago."

"Beggin' your pardon?"

"You weren't Irish," Clark repeated. "You just started talking like that a second ago."

Atlas sighed. "Look." He slumped back a bit, hung his head back over his shoulders, then forced himself to stand up straight again. "You're right, I'm not Irish. It was just—"

"You shouldn't pretend to be something you're not, kid!" Clark interrupted. "You've got to be yourself, be proud of what you got! That's what real winners do!" He leaned forward a bit more, closer than Atlas was comfortable being. With a quick step backward, Atlas nearly fell back into the yard. A thorny shrub pressed itself against his leg, and he leapt forward, standing up straight as an arrow.

"I'm not Irish, my name is Father Ryne O'Malley, and it is very important that I have a talk to your son about something that happened in school!"

Clark narrowed his eyes. "But my son doesn't go to Catholic—"

"The incident occurred the other day at school and involved your son acting out against my son! I plan to bring no disciplinary action against the boy, but I would like to see him and have a brief word with him in private!"

There. He'd gone through the script.

Clark narrowed his eyes further. "But aren't you supposed to be celibate?"

Atlas's stomach tightened. He was starting to wonder how much effort Sorano had really put into this script. "Well, I had him befo—I mean, he's ado—"

"You're not one of *those* priests, are you?"

The wince began deep in Atlas's toes and darted all the way to his neck, and he nearly stumbled backward again. "I-I'm sorry, what? No. What kind of—no, no, not at all. It's just—he punched my kid, and I wanted to talk—because it didn't seem like you—I mean—well..." His eyes kept darting back and forth between those eyes and that outstretched penis like a cat trapped on a highway. The comfort that Mr. Ensor seemed to radiate was almost palpable, and it made Atlas wretch a bit. He coughed to stall for time while he tried to gain control of the conversation, of *something* in his life for a change.

"No, Mr. Ensor, I'm not going to touch your son," Atlas croaked. "Just—please—let me talk to him for a—"

"Oh, there he is!" Mr. Ensor motioned to the house next door, a smaller and quainter house with a well-cut lawn, well-trimmed hedges, and three pink flamingos forming a half-circle around the door. From the front door emerged a 10-year-old boy with spiked dark hair wearing a powder yellow shirt that looked at least three times his age, followed closely by a chubby old lady in a flowery dress with slightly bluish gray hair wisping up beneath her flowery brimmed hat. Atlas scanned the boy up and down, and he seemed just as Sorano had described: ten years old, bored, and rich. Without a doubt, the grim heart of a killer beat beneath those flared lapels.

"Well, listen, if you're going to take care of that little matter, then I'm not even going to worry about it," Mr. Ensor said, taking a step back from the door. "I'm terribly sorry about what happened, and if you need my number, it's in the phone book. If you need my attorney's number, I can get you that, too."

"Thank—"

The door slammed shut, and a woman squealed inside with more orgasmic ecstasy than Atlas could ever hope to induce.

"-you, prick."

Even though he wasn't sure how much of this Christian mythology he really trusted, Atlas still held tight to the crucifix around his neck. Something about the inch-tall Jesus made him feel a little bit stronger, or at least a little bit safer. Sorano had told him that the kid wouldn't go after him so long as he had that—it wasn't like in the movies Atlas thought he had seen, where demons jumped out of the possessed and into the exorcist. It was just a piece of jewelry, but just the way it looked was sure to keep whatever was inside the kid at bay.

Atlas felt the ridges and sharp corners of each and every one of Jesus's wounds as he turned toward the next house over, toward the old lady and the boy, and stepped forward.

Rosie heard Clark's door slam shut and looked up to find a very perplexed priest standing on their front porch. The man turned slowly toward her, staring bullets at Connor.

"So they're Catholic now, are they?" Rosie muttered to herself. She was sure she'd heard on TV one time that the Catholics celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday, so it made sense for that priest to be out at this time on the *real* holiest of days. A few stray thoughts ricocheted through

her mind: they were Christian at least, but did she really want them to be *that* kind of Christian, the kind that gets forgiveness for money and thinks that it's just as important to worship Mary? Were the Catholics the ones who had told Connor it was okay to call his mother "Felicity?" Were the Catholics the ones who told him he didn't have to wash up before dinner and that it was absolutely okay to eat dinner in front of the television?

"Uh, pardon—"

The priest was in her yard! Rosie's cheeks turned up into a big, clumsy smile, and she patted the priest on the shoulder.

"Well, hello there and God bless you, Father!" she chirped. "So lovely to see you here on the *Sabbath Day*, isn't it?"

"Eh, yes, it surely is, m'lady!" he answered. "And a top o' the morning to ye as well!"

And already Rosie's smile had disappeared. "You're not Irish."

The priest locked eyes with her. He suddenly looked so disarmed, so defenseless that Rosie considered letting up, but she couldn't.

"That's a phony Irish accent," Rosie said. "My parents came right off the boat from Ireland, and I know an Irish accent. Why do you think my maiden name is Rosie Flanagan?"

The priest's shoulders sagged, and his head slumped down almost as low as his chest. "Well, I was—"

"You were bearing false testimony against your neighbor, son, and that's a Commandment breaker!" she hissed, wagging a finger. "Even in your funny interpretation of the Bible or whatever deceitful tome you use, you should still know the Ten Commandments! You know the Ten Commandments, right?"

Rosie kept going, but Atlas was almost quivering with something on the road toward rage but definitely well within the city limits of frustration. He knew that this had been a hell of a day, but this lady took the cake. He wondered if it would be easier just to go back home now, let the kid be possessed, and let the whole world be screwed as a result—he could probably get in a quick game of *Brutal Arms* before he fell asleep and forgot this whole thing ever happened. But something nagged at him, a still-small voice he was too tired to recognize as a conscience. It told him to make one last stab at heroism, to save the boy once and for all. He looked down at Connor and tried to read that face, and when he found out he couldn't, he

assumed the kid was desperate. He needed a hero. He needed Atlas.

And so Atlas the hero reached into his robes, removed a vial of holy water, and splashed it over Connor in a quick cross motion.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Connor demanded. He ran his fingers over the wet spots on his jacket and scowled. "What was that for? I didn't do nothing!"

"You didn't do *anything*, Connor, and yes, why did you do—" Rosie began but quickly found herself falling backward and landing on the lawn as the priest lunged for Connor. Pushing her glasses back against her face, Rosie watched as the priest produced a crucifix from his robe and began thrusting it toward Connor, crossing himself with it while holding the boy down with the other.

The priest had snapped. He had tried the script, and it had failed. He had tried the lies, the impersonations, and the stories, and they had failed. All his lessons in the ritual failed; all the lines from *De Exorcismis et Supplicationibus Quibusdam* had been forgotten. It was time to go Hollywood.

"IN NOMINE PATRIS, ET FILII, ET SPIRITUS SANCTI, I COMMAND YOU!" he screamed. "THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS YOU, NOXIOUS VERMIN! NOXIOUS VERMIN! IN THE NAME OF THE

FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, I BESEECH YOU, *LEAVE!*
GET THEE BACK, DEMON, BACK TO THE PITS OF HELL WHENCE THOU
HAST EMERGED! GET THEE BACK NOW! THE POWER OF CHRIST
COMPELS YOU! IN... uh... VERITAS DE FILII ET... ah... DEUS... EX...
MACHINA, ET... THE POWER OF CHRI-!"

The sharp sting of Rosie's heel on the back of the priest's neck made him fall forward, dropping his holy water and dropping Connor in the process. He grabbed the back of his neck in pain—not just from the shock of being struck, but from the fact that for a fat old lady, Rosie could kick pretty damn hard.

"And that's what you get!" she shouted, pulling Connor to his feet. "That boy didn't do anything to you, and you tackled him like that? Tried to pull off some of that Catholic speaking-in-tongues nonsense to try to bring that boy over? That boy won't be tainted by your ways, Father, and he won't be corrupted by the—the *perpetrator* of a false idol! He's been a good boy for the past week, and I'm ready to—"

"WAIT!"

The force behind the priest's voice stopped Rosie dead in her tracks. He stood up slowly, and Connor pulled back into Rosie's arm. The priest was taller than her by well over a foot, but it was Rosie in this moment who stood far,

far taller, her upper lip stiff, her brow furrowed and determined.

Why did she stop? Atlas thought. Somewhere in the back corners of his mind, a synapse fired to life that had lay dormant for a while, and on another level of consciousness, a level where Atlas had previously lived, performed, and played psychic hockey, Atlas's mind whispered to Rosie's mind, *Hear me out*. In the real world, Atlas was just glad to have her attention.

"Just the past week?" the priest asked, his voice trembling.

"Y-Yes, just this past week," Rosie replied. She seemed almost shaken by the man's insecurity.

"What happened this past week?"

Rosie scratched her head. "Well, it was just after that day when I played piano for him for the first time. I sang Mr. Perry Como to him, and he-why, he just lightened up, bright as day!" Rosie closed her eyes, as if she was reminiscing about something that had happened years before. "I'm telling you, Mr... errr..."

"Atlas Robinson."

"...Mr. Robinson, it was like night and day, the way that boy cheered up. We sang, and we talked, and he's going to church with me now, and I'm gonna teach him to play

piano just like a real stage musician!" She beamed, rubbing Connor's hair, again finding it almost immobile.

Atlas couldn't help but smile back. "Rosie."

"Mrs. Roth."

"...yes, Mrs. Roth. I'm very, very sorry about what happened just then. I hope you know I wasn't trying to hurt the kid."

"Well, you sure do have a funny way of not hurting someone, Mr. Robinson!" she snapped.

"It must look that way, yeah," Atlas said, clasping her arms with his hands. She started to pull away before her eyes met his, before she saw that vulnerability come back, that confusion. She didn't see a sinister demon behind those eyes; she saw a poor soul lost in a difficult world, wandering in darkness without a light—a lost, blind wretch like so many others.

"What do you want, Mr. Robinson?" she asked, her tone flat but earnest.

"Let me make it up to you," he said. "Let me do something nice for you—take you out to lunch. My treat."

Rosie thought about this. She was set on making fried chicken for herself and Connor after church, but stepping out would be nice, and she wouldn't have to go to the store so soon. Then, as she looked up at Atlas, into those

vulnerable eyes, down into that white collar and beyond it, to that little broken Jesus hanging from that cross, she knew.

"Come to church with me."

Atlas released his grip. "E-Excuse me?"

"Come to church with me!" she laughed. "And not that fake Catholic temple or whatever it is you call it, but real, good ol' fashioned down-home church where people get up and sing and praise the Lord Jesus Christ and don't pay any lip service to Mary and nobody has to confess anything to anyone but the Lord if they don't want to!"

"I wouldn't want to im--"

"Oh, it wouldn't impose on anything now!" Rosie grabbed Atlas by the hand and gripped it like she was trying to tear it off. "Now come on to church with us, and we'll get you and the boy right before God before you can say, 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!'"

And with that, Rosie pulled Atlas and Connor toward her deep blue Cadillac. She couldn't believe it—not only was she going to be able to bring Connor before God, but also a Catholic. And not just any Catholic, but one of their priests! She couldn't wait to see the look on Martha

and Pastor Mark's face when they saw her bringing a genuine Catholic priest through the door of that church!

Atlas could only regard Rosie with a smirk, but in the back of his mind, something was definitely nagging. The holy water had done nothing but get Connor wet. The Latin had done nothing but piss him off. He had no doubts that this was the right boy, but what about the exorcism? He was already sure he needed help, and Sorano had only left him one outlet to get that help.

They would have lunch at Waffle House.

XI: THE BOYS

There's a song in the South that parodies the traditional folk song "There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea" called, appropriately, "There's a Church on Top of the Hill." Like its counterpart, "Church" supposes an ever-infinitesimal series of objects within objects, concepts within concepts, to form sort of a sonic fractal, ever complex no matter how small it gets. Within the church on top of the hill, there is said to be a pew, a man in the pew, a hand on the man, a Bible in the hand, a book in the Bible, a chapter in the book, a verse in the chapter, love in the verse, and Jesus in the love. Presumably, the process could continue indefinitely if only the songwriters were wise enough to put a Bible in Jesus's hand.

Bailey Church of God sits on top of a hill, but Jesus stands in front of it.

So much for that song.

Not only was Jesus not some part of some recursion within the church, but Atlas was sick of hearing Rosie sing in that pitch-perfect caterwaul about where exactly the

love was relative to the church on top of the hill (somewhere near the pew). He sat in the back of her Cadillac with one leg behind either of the front seats, and he remembered how tall he really was for the first time in some time. There was plenty of leg room—Rosie's seat was all the way forward to allow her to reach the pedals, while Connor's was almost to the dashboard, where he was filling out a worksheet from what looked like a music book.

"Therrrrrrrrre's JESUS in the love in the verse in the Bible in the hand of the man in the pew of the church on top of the hill! Therrrrrrrrrrrrre's JESUS in the love in the verse in the Bible in the hand of the man in the pew in the church on top of the hill!" Rosie took a long, slow, nasally breath, then glanced over at Connor as if expecting him to join in. He drew a letter G under a corresponding note instead. "Oh, there's a CHURRRRRRRCH! There's a CHURRRRRRRRRCH! There's a—oh, glory to God!"

The car suddenly jerked to a halt, and Atlas found his face flung between the two front seats, staring at three men in their thirties who, if they weren't brothers, were probably trying to dress up like each other very convincingly. All three wore matching gray suit jackets and ties with matching checkered prints—the tallest in blue, the middle one in green, the shortest in blue. Of course,

"tallest" and "shortest" were such fine distinctions between these two that they almost weren't. The only real difference Atlas could see was the red moustache on the tallest (matching his curly red hair), the red goatee on the middle, and the red five-o'clock shadow on the shortest.

Something about the strange, bored grins on their faces and the way they waved at Rosie—and the way she waved right back—made Atlas ask, "Oh, are those your sons?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Rosie said with a giggle. "Those are my boys! Come on!" Rosie bounced out of the car before the door was even all the way open, and Connor soon joined in. Atlas wanted to protest, to point out the fact that they hadn't even parked yet, until he realized that they had.

"Boys!" Rosie said. "Boys, boys, boys!" She flung her arms around all three at once—no small feat, given how tall and well-built the three of them were. The boys let out a murmur of "Hi's" and "Hey, Mom's" before the tallest one's eyes turned to Atlas.

"Uh, Mom, any reason why there's a priest following you around?" he asked.

"You didn't become Catholic on us, did you, Mom?" the middle one chimed in.

"Of course she didn't become Catholic, Barry," the shortest one snorted.

"Well then, is he trying to convert you or what?" the tallest added.

"Hi, Barry Roth, you might have seen me on MSNBC, and I'm from TheImpulseShopper.com," the middle one—Barry—suddenly blurted out, grasping Atlas's hand firmly and leaving a business card when he left.

"Darn it, Barry, we're in church. This is no place to shill your wares," the shortest groaned.

"We're not *in* church yet," Barry grunted.

"But wait, why *is* there a priest here?" the tallest repeated.

"He's probably here to pick up donations," Barry mumbled.

"He's a priest, Barry, not UNICEF," the shortest corrected.

"Then he's here to collect offerings," Barry adjusted.

"But it's not his church," the shortest mentioned.

"Well then, why *is* he—"

"I'm here as a favor!"

The power behind that voice even startled Atlas, and he swore he saw the hair on all three of the boys move. Atlas looked around desperately, shuffling his feet. Rosie

smiled awkwardly at him, while Connor just stared up into his throat, studying him, trying to find out where on Earth that voice could've come from.

Deep breath. Rub the temples. "I'm sorry," Atlas said. "My name is Atlas Robinson. I'm a guest of your mother's." Then, with a deep laugh, he motioned toward Connor, who was still staring at Atlas's throat. "One of her *two* guests, you know! Why doesn't the kid get the third degree?"

"Well, I'd say it's not as suspicious," Barry pointed out.

"Or as baffling," the tallest added.

"Or as unusual," the shortest contributed.

"Oh, yeah, because a priest in a church is so unusual," Barry snorted.

"A *Catholic* priest in a *Protestant* church is pretty unusual," the shortest intoned.

"It's all—"

"Boys, boys, boys, boys, boys." All three boys glanced over to find Rosie digging in her purse, pulling out three butterscotch candies wrapped in gold. "Now don't confuse Mr. Robinson. We're in church, after all, and there's no need to be so caustic." She began walking from man to man, dropping a candy in each hand. "Anyway, Mr. Robinson, these are my sons—Gary..." The tallest man got a piece. "Barry..."

The middle man got a piece. "...and Larry." The youngest man got a piece, and Rosie, ever considerate, handed a piece to Connor as well, whispering, "Don't spoil your dinner."

Atlas turned over the names in his head, turned them over again, then heard them fall out of his head. "Geez, lady—"

"Rosie."

"—Rosie, you sure can name your triplets."

"Oh, that was my Rusty's idea!" she said with a laugh. "And he used to—oh, but there's no time for that now! We'd better go get ourselves a pew before all the good ones are taken and we have to sit in the back near the door and—" All at once, Rosie flung her arms around her sons one more time. "—oh, my word, it's just so wonderful of you boys to surprise your old mother like this!"

As Rosie led the group inside, chattering away about this and that while her sons dutifully nodded whenever they needed to, Atlas felt someone punch him in the arm. He looked down to find Connor looking back up at him.

"Why'd you do that?" Atlas whispered, sensing somehow that Connor wasn't trying to pick a fight.

"How'd you do that thing with your voice?" he asked.

Atlas blinked. "Wh-what—"

"That thing where you made it really loud."

"Oh-oh, that? I don't know. It just sort of came out that way."

"Oh, okay." Connor nodded, and the two suddenly noticed they were in the vestibule, being introduced to this Judy and that Mark and this Pam and that Vernon and this fellow who's been with the church for five years now and this poor old woman whose husband recently went to be with the Lord, bless his heart.

"I'm not mad at you, y'know," Connor said.

"Mad about what?" Atlas asked, shaking the hand of someone whom Rosie introduced as either Kevin or Devon."

"When you knocked me down a while ago," he said. "I don't know why, but I don't think you were trying to hurt me. I think you were trying to help."

"I was," Atlas admitted, finally getting a chance to look down at Connor, who had made his way behind the triplets and out of Rosie's sight. "Connor, do you ever hear voices?"

Without even flinching, Connor nodded. "Well, I used to anyway. It was a mad voice. I think it was bossing somebody around. But I don't hear it no more."

"Any more, Connor," Rosie, who had found him and was pulling him to her side, suddenly said. "You don't hear it any more."

As Rosie led the group inside and to a pew near the front, Atlas and Connor made eye contact once again. Atlas had decided he liked Connor just as much as Rosie did but for different reasons. He was a nice kid, sure, but he was obviously smart, too, and if what Sorano had told him was correct, he had loads of potential. The two were in the same boat here in Bailey Church of God, two strangers brought to God's crowded vestibule by Rosie Roth, a woman who shouldn't have had anything to do with any of this. When they sat down in the church, Connor sat down next to Atlas, and the two slapped a quick high-five for reasons neither of them seemed to understand.

"But that's not what they tell you, is it?"

The pastor of Bailey Church of God was, like many other pastors, named Mark, and like many other pastors, he got excited at all the right moments. His energy was the only thing keeping Atlas awake during his sermon on the Five Principles That Should Guide Your Hand In The Voting Booth Next November. He had already finished off prayer and was en route to the one that was apparently most important on this particular day: character.

Atlas glanced over at Connor to find him juggling between looking at the pastor and reading a Bible from the

back of the pew in front of him. He had turned to Matthew and was reading about something, and only the amount of red text could tell Atlas that it was old Jesus rambling on about something again.

"Oh, no, that's not what they tell you at all!" Mark shouted. He slammed a fist against the pulpit, and the monitors hanging over his head vibrated and squealed just loud enough for Atlas to begin a new game: wondering when they'd fall and crush the pastor.

"Oh, they'll tell you they're good Christian men and women, and they'll show up in church on Sunday when the cameras are on. But so many of these politicians are liars and deceivers!"

A few murmured "Amen's."

"They're fornicators and schemers!"

A few louder "Amen's," Rosie among them. The sermon had her on the edge of her seat, but Atlas was sure a sermon on buttered toast would've had the same effect so long as Pastor Mark worked Jesus in there somewhere.

"The Bible tells us of many deceivers, and the father of them all is Satan. He's right there at the beginning, people—right there in the Garden, claiming to have the answers! We're not talking about a wolf in sheep's clothing... oh, no! We're talking about a demon in an angel's

clothing, and we need to pray that the Lord give us the insight to see through the lies!"

Atlas rolled his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd flipped through the channels to hear a pastor speak, or if he'd even been to church before this day. But he knew bullshit when he heard it, and if the Christian God was the force capable of stopping lying politicians, then he should've done it by now. The powers that he had—or that Sorano had told him he'd had anyway—were a good enough refutation of the whole damn affair. Of course there wasn't an invisible man in the sky; the real gods were here on Earth, sitting in pews and wondering when the lies were going to end.

"—and then they throw him in the trash can, my friends! Ten dead babies piled high!"

Atlas had missed a few sentences there.

"My friends, we are in a way in this country," Pastor Mark said. The piano player—he thought her name was Patty, or maybe Mattie—had made her way back up and began playing a few slow bars of "How Great Thou Art." "We are in a war to preserve our morals as a Christian nation and to keep the halls of Washington free of liars and deceivers. We are in a war for ourselves, for our families, and for our children. And when you enter that voting booth this

November, don't think of that as a voting pen or a stylus in your hands, my friends. That's a sword—that's a righteous tool of God. And you'll honor Him through your thoughts, through your prayers, and through your decision to vote for His glory in this great nation. Bow your heads with me."

Every face in the church dropped except for Atlas's. There must have been two hundred people in this church, eyes closed, not looking up, not looking forward. *They never look forward*, Atlas mused to himself. *And these are the sorts of people that want to run the show?* He looked over at Rosie to find her praying softly to herself while Pastor Mark prayed into the microphone, echoing every sentence he uttered with a "Yes, Lord," or an "Oh, God, hallelujah." If there was a demon on the loose like Sorano said, it wouldn't touch this woman with a ten-foot pitchfork.

"...and with every head bowed and every eye closed, no one looking around this morning, maybe you're here today and you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior."

Atlas looked up at Pastor Mark, and he felt like his eyes were going to pop out of his head. If ever there was a message for salvation, this wasn't it.

"Maybe you're here tonight and you want to say, 'Yes, Pastor Mark. I'm ready to make that commitment. I'm ready to commend my life to the Lord Jesus Christ and to live for His glory and His love. If that's you, this morning, I just want you to slip out of your pew and come up to the front here and find a place to pray. Just do that for me, will you? Just right now. Nobody's looking around, but the Lord can still see what's in your heart. Is there anyone this morning?"

And there was. By the time Atlas was able to turn his head, Connor was passing the end of the aisle, making his way to the front of the church as Pastor Mark sighed, "Yes, thank you, hallelujah." As he passed her, Rosie's head popped into view for the first time. She had been staring toward the place where Atlas and Connor were sitting, her head leaning a bit toward the pulpit and nodding. She was still staring at Atlas, still motioning toward the front of the church, and Atlas decided that, just to keep up appearances, he'd better go up there. He settled near Connor and bowed his head, mumbling to himself.

"Oh Jesus, this is so ridiculous," he murmured. "All I have to do is say 'God' and 'Jesus' and 'saved' and 'hallelujah' every now and then and they'll think I'm asking for forgiveness. As if I've done anything wrong." He

paused. "Well, as if I've done anything worse than what your followers have—oh, God, oh, Jesus, oh, hallelujah." He felt Rosie's hand clasp onto his back, and he heard her praying loudly, almost weeping herself.

Atlas felt like he should ratchet up the drama a bit. All of a sudden, he stood up, grabbing at the collar of his vestments as if ripping a boa constrictor from his neck.

"Oh, God!" he shouted. "Oh, Father, *hallelujah*! I cast off this tainted robe, this tainted collar!" He tore the white collar off and threw it to the ground, stomping it once or twice for good measure. In the crowd, a few scattered applause rose. "Oh, God, I shall live no longer for the Pope or for the Bishops! I commend myself into *Your* hands, in Jesus's name! Oh, hallelujah!"

Atlas turned around, arms raised high, and he was in that moment a hero. He held his hands up and muttered the "Oh God's" and "Oh Jesus's" once again as Rosie, her face soaked with tears, thrust her face into his chest, weeping and laughing at the same time. The piano seemed to rise a little bit, and sunlight danced in from the stained glass windows outside. There, before the eyes of God's congregation, stood Father Atlas Robinson, casting off his priestly ways in the name of the real god, Jesus Christ.

And Atlas was glad that, after that episode in the front yard, he could have a little heroism anyway—even if it was so, so much bullshit.

Meanwhile, Connor stood up, looked up at Atlas, and walked back to the pew, where he sat down and returned to the Bible.

XII: WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

The way Sorano had described it to him, Atlas was expecting spectacular things from this Waffle House. He imagined it looming over a hillside, its towers and turrets rising like grim hydra necks above the crenellated stone walls. The drawbridge would be lowered, and the rusty old portcullis would slowly rise to greet him as he crossed over the moat, staring up at the Old English letters high above the gate. WAFFLE HOUSE. Or maybe WAFFELLE HAÜS. Either way, the stench of mildew and blood and tragic decay would emanate from the building as he entered the vast hall. A flash of lightning within would illuminate someone standing in the center of the room. Maybe he was a wizened old wizard, anxious to teach Atlas the nature of his problem. Or maybe a sagacious king would assist him in hunting down Connor's tormentor. Or maybe a haggard old witch, bent over a cauldron, would show him where to find that brute and destroy him.

Instead, he stepped out of Rosie's Cadillac to find a normal Waffle House.

Not even a Haüs.

It was maroon and yellow and made out of bricks, and the old sign said WAFFLE HOUSE, each letter inside a yellow square. An awning hung over the tall windows. It smelled like chili and burnt potatoes.

"I must say, Mr. Robinson, I find your choice of restaurant... interesting," Larry, the shortest of the triplets, said as the three of them emerged from the dark blue Chrysler that Gary the oldest had driven. "I could've made much better food at home myself, you know."

"Yeah, why are we eating here? A greasy spoon of all places?" Gary inquired.

"Larry makes chili for a living, you know. He could probably do much better," Barry suggested.

"I already said that, Barry," Larry grimaced.

"I know, but I was just calling attention to it again," Barry responded.

"But why *are* we eating here again?" Gary reiterated.

"I think the ex-priest owes Mom and the kid a lunch," Barry reminded everyone.

"Then he should be doing better than *this*," Larry agitated.

"Boys, boys, boys, *please!*" Rosie chuckled. She slapped Atlas on the shoulder, and he winced at her

strength. "This place looks... fine. Mr. Robinson said he'd take us all out to eat, and we should all be thankful. Do you all remember what happened to the Israelites who didn't like the manna they were given?"

"They were given *quail*?" One of the triplets muttered it, but Atlas couldn't tell which one.

"He kept them out of the Promised Land!" Rosie shouted. "Now let's just enjoy our company and fellowship with the two newest sheep the Lord has welcomed back into the fold! I'm sure the meal will be just lovely."

Atlas shot Connor a knowing glance, arching his eyebrows and smirking at the word "sheep." He looked back, but he narrowed his eyes, looking confused. It was odd; Atlas almost had a feeling that when Connor had gone to the front of the church, he had meant it. And all this time, the poor kid had seemed like he was in the know.

"You had a choice, and you chose us," the girl behind the counter sighed with a voice that implied she wouldn't have said it if she wasn't already in trouble for not saying it. "Thanks for coming to Waffle House."

It was odd, but something about hearing that sentence filled Atlas with an overwhelming sense of peace and security, as if that sentence held hidden power. Even with the nonchalant way the cashier said them, they held an

inexorable power. All at once, Atlas's worries about his mission, about his apparent failure, and about the little psychopath who was refusing to be exorcised out of the other little psychopath faded into a sweet haze of Bert's Chili, Alice's Iced Tea, and—he could just make out her nametag—Stella's Magic Words of Peace.

"Oooh, classy," one of the triplets muttered.

"It's like Paris," another added.

"Shush," Rosie said before waving to the cashier. She led the group to a group of corner tables and took a seat, then began rooting around in her purse. Atlas leaned against the table with his hands and sighed—that deep sort of release sigh that comes after either sex or a good meal. It was odd to find it come before one.

"Now, I know you boys have been just dying to come visit me even though you haven't had the time, and I understand that," Rosie said. Atlas pulled a chair close to the table but had no intention of sitting down, and he kept glancing back toward the counter.

Alice. Sorano had said her name was Alice.

"So I figure if you boys are going to surprise me like this, we'd better start this dinner off the right way," Rosie continued and produced a deck of cards from her purse. Mark Twain smirked at Atlas from the front of the

sea green deck, which read *Authors Card Game*. "Have you ever played Authors, Mr. Robinson?"

"No," Atlas said, still focusing on the counter. From the back, an overweight woman carried a bag of onions with a look of determination that defied the fact that all she was carrying was onions and not, say, the Ark of the Covenant.

"Oh," Rosie said. The cards hit the table with a loud thunk as Rosie dropped them from their box. "Well, you see, the rules are a lot like—"

"Go Fish," Atlas muttered.

"Yes, Go Fish," Rosie said. "And there are sets of authors in the deck, thirteen in all, and four books each. You want to try to collect all of the books by an author, say..." Atlas turned to see her drawing a card out and looking it over. "...William Makepeace Thackeray, who wrote—"

"*Vanity Fair, Pendennis, Henry Esmond, and The Virginians,*" Atlas mumbled. As he said them, the kitchen door opened again, and something bright yellow walked through—bright yellow and abnormally large. Before Atlas could figure out it wasn't Big Bird, he found himself turning around to find every face at the table staring at him. The triplets were flabbergasted. Rosie was scratching

her head. And Connor was smiling a bit, as if he knew a secret.

"You're sure you never played this game before, Mr. Robinson?" Rosie asked. She held the card up to him, and a square-jawed British man stared back. The card had four books on top: the exact four Atlas had just said.

"Errrr, yeah, pretty sure I'd remember playing a game like this," he said.

"So you must be a fan of Mr. Thackeray then," Rosie said.

"No, not really." He thought back—truly thought back, hacking through the forest of his amnesia like Stanley searching for Dr. Livingstone. William Makepeace Thackeray. Surely he'd remember someone with that name. And he couldn't remember a single other piece Thackeray had written. And he couldn't remember a single word from his writings. Just those four. In that order.

He turned back to the counter to find someone else staring at him. The yellow thing that had walked from the back was, as it turned out, not a six-foot canary at all, but was actually a very tall blonde woman in a yellow uniform with her hands on her hips, staring daggers into him. Everything about her, from the ponytail in her bright

hair to the shimmer off of her eyes, made her seem so sunny, but the glare on her face eclipsed that sunlight.

She was tall, she was gorgeous, she was staring at him, she was terrifying, and she was angry. If William Makepeace Thackeray didn't look familiar, she definitely did. And so did the name on her nametag: Alice Stond.

"E-Excuse me for a second," Atlas said. "You all order whatever you want. I need to go ask this lady something." He reached into his back pocket and produced a fifty dollar bill, which he placed in front of Rosie, who was still staring, first at Atlas, then at Thackeray, then back at Atlas, then back at Thackeray. "If I'm not back before you're finished, pay for everything, okay? Thanks. Yeah. Back in a bit. Bye." And before anyone could ask another question, he was off, moving from one confused party to another one.

Only this new one, when he approached, grabbed his arm at the wrist and squeezed. There was amazing tension, just enough for Atlas to feel his bones rattle but not enough to break them.

"You got a lot of nerve showing your face around here, sugar," Alice whispered. "So you better explain yourself right quick before I force us to take this outside."

For a long moment, Atlas panicked. Sorano's advice seemed to be slipping away, and every file the skeletons tried to drag up led back to one interminable thought. Pain. Pain. Pain. It hurt like hell, and not just an idiomatic hell. This hurt like a hell Atlas was sure he'd been to.

The truth, Sorano had told him. *The truth will set you free.*

"I've lost my memory!" Atlas gasped. "All I remember is the name Atlas Robinson, and Sorano told me that I got amnesia from a knock on the head from some kind of evil invading alien forces from another planet, and now I have to protect that kid over there because demons or some shit are trying to possess him, only when I got here he didn't seem possessed at all and I think the demons might have gone away, and now I'm confused and don't know what to do because I didn't get a chance to succeed at the damn mission because it was already finished by the time I got here, and that woman is Rosie Roth and she's a nice enough lady but I can't for the life of me figure out why she didn't abort her sons, and Sorano is really someone named Emily from Indianapolis in case you were wondering, and what in the hell is wrong with my brain, and why in the hell can't I remember why you'd be so pissed at me?"

It was a long gasp, to be sure.

Alice slowly released her grip, but not before giving Atlas's wrist another solid squeeze, then another, then another, then another, then another. He pulled his wrist back into his chest and rubbed it.

"Now what was that for?" he asked.

"Five swears," she snapped. "You watch your language when you're in my house, memory loss or no. This here's sacred ground."

"Sacred ground!?" Atlas shrieked. "I don't even know what the heeeeeeeel...eck you're talking about anymore! Will someone please explain things so they make even a small morsel of sense? Is that too much to ask? Please, just tell me what I have to do and why I can't seem to do it! I don't —"

And with that, Alice's finger was at his lips, and he felt calm beginning to return. With a small smile, she pointed around the restaurant, toward the Roths and Connor, toward a few college students in overpriced T-shirts with synthetic wear and tear, toward an old man in a flannel jacket sipping a cup of coffee. They were all staring at him.

"Settle down, hon," Alice whispered. "You had a choice, and you chose us. Thanks for coming." The words—

this time coming with a sweetness that transcended honey, that transcended even ambrosia—felt even more soothing when Alice said them. “Now let’s talk.”

Atlas massaged his temples, his wrist already feeling much better. “Okay, where should I—”

“Stella?” Alice had already turned and was talking to the girl who had greeted them. She turned to Alice and, for just a second, seemed to perk up. “Stella, hon, can you cover the front? I need a smoke break.”

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Stella said.

“I don’t, but I need a smoke break.”

Alice had taken Atlas to the hallway near the restrooms and pushed on a brick on the wall, which then opened to reveal another room. “Employee restroom” was the only explanation she offered when they stepped inside to find something that did, in fact, look like an employee restroom: one bathroom, one stall, one sink, very little cleaning. The bathroom stall was covered in graffiti.

Alice leaned against the far wall and drew something from her pocket. It looked like a cigarette but smelled sweet, and she chewed on the tip of it, tearing off part of the other end for Atlas.

"Chew this, honey," she said. "It's a root from where I live. It'll calm you down."

That was all Atlas needed to hear, and he took the root and chewed it. He felt calm but not in the way a cigarette could calm someone down—it was peaceful rather than euphoric.

"Thanks," Atlas said, and he meant it.

"Okay then, let's start with this," Alice said. "My name's Alice Stond. My real name's much older—Anactoria. Greek, like yours. And it looks like you may have stumbled into some good things in your life for a change, hon. That woman looks like a nice lady."

"She is," Atlas said. "And if it weren't for all the Bible-thumping, I might like her even more."

"Did she take you to church?" Alice asked, a cool smile crossing her face.

"Yeah," Atlas said.

"Good." She stepped away from the wall for a minute and stretched, and Atlas was struck once again by her height—she was taller than him, and he was not short. "Y'all could do to have a little of that in your life."

"Oh, come on," he said, rolling his eyes. "We both know it's all fake. I mean, the fact that people like us

exist and can have these abilities pretty much negates the whole book, right?"

Alice chewed on the root.

"Right?"

She shook her head. "Let's just say that they ain't as backwoods as you think. And anyway, it ain't like Christianity is based on bad ideas. Get right down to the heart of that book and it all boils down to compassion. And there sure ain't enough of that in the world."

Atlas rolled his eyes. Connor hadn't sided with him, and now, it seemed, even the supernatural forces of the world had been blinded to its power. A guy coming back to life two thousand years ago? That just didn't make any sense.

Alice, however, was glaring at him. "Now don't y'all get it in your head that you're gonna use your power to kick people around just because they got faith. And don't you dare look down on people."

"Fine," Atlas said. "Can I just ask you something?"

"Absolutely."

"Why Waffle House?"

To answer that, Alice directed Atlas to the graffiti on the stall. As Atlas looked at it, the scratched drawings and phone numbers, they seemed to be resolving themselves

into shapes—stick figures, like drawings on the walls of caves. The stick figures seemed to be fighting.

Inside his head, Atlas heard a voice narrating, a deep, rich baritone glimmering with folksy wisdom.

It was unmistakable. Morgan Freeman was narrating the graffiti.

"In 1955, the battle between the supernatural forces headed by Loki and those headed by Thor had reached a fever pitch," the voice explained. "They'd traveled to America and brought their particular brand of hatred with them. Oh, don't ask me why they decided to do something like that. And don't ask me why they needed to travel to Georgia to duke it out, either. Sometimes, a man just does things that don't make a lick of sense."

The stick figures suddenly swirled around until they were battling in what appeared to be a swamp, trading-for some reason—fists.

"When the battle hit the Okefenokee Swamp, things took a turn for the worse. There's a sacred part of this swamp not many folks know about called The Grog, where the Suwannee River branches off into an underwater cave. That's where the Grog-Otter sleeps."

Several more of the lines coalesced to form a huge, otter-like creature, which slept while the two forces

fought it out. Finally, it roused itself and looked up, irritated.

"Loki and Thor didn't realize they'd upset one of this planet's nastiest and most powerful magic creatures until it was too late. The thing damn near blew its lid off when it heard that ruckus, and it put a curse on the planet because of it."

The Grog-Otter began to move its lips. All at once, the fighting stopped.

"Round that same time, a lady in Washington was set to give birth to a little boy who would change the world. He'd have revolutionized the computer industry. He'd have made software that was so efficient and so free of bugs that all the world would be singing his praises."

The two leaders of the stick figures suddenly seemed terrified.

"Instead, the Grog-Otter's curse meant that every bit of software this man came up with would be exploitable, unstable, and just an all-around pain. And the real kick in the teeth was that it'd still be as popular."

For just a moment, all of the sticks on the wall seemed to collect themselves into a very familiar face, one marked by terrible glasses, a stupid grin, and a \$2.50 haircut. A moment later, they coalesced again to a

restaurant dining room, where the stick figures had all gathered.

"And so the two sides saw that their fight had caused more harm to the world than they ever could've dreamed. Even Loki, rotten scoundrel that he was, felt bad about the whole deal. So they set out to discuss their differences up north, at a little place just opening up with a bright yellow sign, on that Labor Day in 1955. They reached a peace. And they agreed that there'd be no more lying among them, so long as they were within those walls."

The two lead stick figures shook hands, and the image suddenly froze.

"The Waffle House Accords remain to this day. No supernatural being can fight in Waffle House, and no supernatural being can lie in Waffle House. That's just the way things are."

The voice faded out. Atlas turned back to Alice, looking a little confused, but something about it, inexplicably, seemed to click.

"So that's why she sent me here," Atlas said.

"Sure is," Alice replied. "Plus there's always a good-hearted Psi-Gifted person on staff like me to keep you straight. Sorano knew you'd run into me here."

"So Morgan Freeman is Psi-Gifted, too?"

"Naw, but we paid him real good."

"Ah." Atlas mulled it over in his head. "So I'm here and I'm safe. What should happen now?"

Alice paused to think. "Well, I reckon if the kid's okay—and y'all know the kid's okay—then you can head back to see Sorano again and see if she's got something better to do. I'd recommend you find somebody to keep an eye on the lil' feller while you're gone, though. Somebody you can trust."

"Can you do it?"

"Sorry, hon. They need me here."

"Ah." Atlas leaned back against the doorway, looking over Alice again. She smiled at him, and for once, he smiled back. "Thanks for your help. I'm going to get Rosie back home and then wait around here—see if I can't find anyone to help me out. Thanks for your help."

"No problem, boyo," she said. As Atlas turned to leave, though, she grabbed him by the arm and turned him around. "Oh. Almost forgot. When you run into Sorano again, could you deliver a message for me?"

"Sure. What?"

And Alice suddenly thrust her face toward Atlas's, pinning him to the wall. She slipped her tongue into his mouth and swirled it around in passionate curves, tracing

it across his tongue, against his palette, through his teeth. When she finished, Atlas was reeling.

"Just like that," Alice said.

"Uh... huh..." Atlas replied. His mind was swirling with thoughts, but he found that he absolutely liked each and every one of them for once. "And—I'm gonna remember—"

"You'll remember," Alice said.

"...ah." And with that, Atlas stumbled out of the employee restroom.

When he returned to the table, Atlas found that the group had finished with their meals. The triplets looked none too pleased. Connor waved at Atlas as he entered. And Rosie beamed at his return.

"Well, Mr. Robinson, Connor here sure is an expert at Authors!" she said.

"Little punk won every game," Gary muttered.

"Got every card, too," Barry added.

"Actually, I got all the William Makepeace Thackeray cards in that second game," Larry corrected.

"You started with all those cards," Barry snapped.

"But he didn't get them," Larry concluded.

"Hey, Atlas," Connor said. "Thanks for getting us lunch. It was real good."

Atlas paused and looked at Rosie, waiting for her to correct his grammar. When she didn't, he said, "Okay then, let's get going."

Atlas walked toward the counter but saw Alice wave at him—the international motion for "Don't worry about it; it's on the house." He led the group back out of the restaurant and toward the car.

"Rosie, why don't we go back to your house?" Atlas said. "I think I'll need to stay here for a while, but I can—"

"Why's that?"

Atlas turned with a start to find a man standing outside of the Waffle House who hadn't been there before. He was short, fat, and balding, his light blue T-shirt barely covering his gut. Atlas turned back to Rosie, who looked confused. He eyed the triplets, who looked frustrated. He glanced at Connor, who looked shocked—probably just surprised that the man had appeared.

The man motioned for Atlas to come closer. He lowered himself a bit so the man could whisper into his ear.

"So, uh, hey, you don't remember me, do ya?" he said. "Upsilon Turquoise? Old running buddy? We used to, uh—y'know—what you did before you lost your memory?"

"You're an Atlantean Cloud?" Atlas whispered. It didn't sound right—the name "Upsilon Turquoise" had some kind of resonance to it, but the skeleton staff in Atlas's mind couldn't place it. All they found were Greek letters and colors and nothing to connect them with.

"Oh, yeah, don't you know it!" Upsilon laughed. "Fought side-by-side with you! Hey, listen, you here to look after the kid?"

"Keeping an eye on him, yeah," Atlas said. "But it looks like he's had whatever's bugging him exorcised."

"Ain't that a stitch," Upsilon grunted. "Listen, you need somebody to look after him? I'm your guy. You just head off and do what you need to do. Hey, you want to take a voyage of self-discovery? Go for a long walk? You do that. It should do you a lot of good. And the kid'll be in good hands. Promise. Hand to the gods."

Atlas thought this over. "But how do I know I can trust you?"

"Waffle House, man," Upsilon said. "Can't lie? Remember?"

"Oh, yeah..." Atlas said. "Yeah, I'm going back to see Sorano."

"Huh?" Upsilon said. "Sorano? Sora—oh, right, Sorano. Gotcha. Yeah, you go back and see Sorano."

"And you'll watch Connor?"

"He'll be in good hands."

"I appreciate it." Rosie and Connor had piled back into the car, and Atlas slid in to join them while Upsilon Turquoise waved.

"Who was that, sweetie?" Rosie asked.

"College buddy," Atlas said. And he did not once realize the irony of the fact that he was lying as they drove away.

XIII: SAPPHO

That night, Rosie and the triplets sat on the back porch of Rosie's house in lawn chairs watching the stars come out. They talked with long breaks between questions and answers, with the usually combative boys staying calm. The light bulb over the back porch hummed, and Rosie rocked on the porch swing, cross-stitching David and Goliath onto a square piece of white cloth. He could see the pattern from across the yard and the words beneath the picture of the young boy with his huge cartoon eyes staring down the giant, who looked about thirty feet tall: "With God, All Things Are Possible."

The grass felt moist with dew as Atlas leaned back into it, looking up at those stars. He wondered what was possible with God, whoever He was and whatever value He really had. He thought about his own name; even though Sorano had made it quite clear that he wasn't *that* Atlas, he still wondered if he could hold that sky up. Of course, in these times, no one seemed to need someone to hold the sky up for them; it hung up there just fine, pricked in the

night by sparkling thumbtacks. With God, All Things Are Possible. Atlas wondered if He could help him rip the sky down and pin it back up again.

"Rosie," he said.

The old lady looked up from her cross-stitching with a gleam in her eye, the wrinkles on her face curving around her features like ripples in a pond. The shawl fell over her lap like a waterfall into that pond. And her stomach made a strange noise like a frog on a lily pad on that pond. For a moment, she was the wisest thing Atlas had ever seen, and he was sure he'd seen some damn wise things before.

"I think I need to go now."

"Oh, but you just got here, dear!" she said. "Come now, at least tell me you'll stay the night."

"I've done some bad things," he responded, standing up. He started to snicker when he thought back to his confession at the church but caught himself. "I need to go set them right. And I just want to say thank you for all you've done."

"You should thank the Lord, Mr. Robins—"

"Atlas."

Rosie blushed and turned away a bit. "Oh, dear, Atlas, can I at least give you a ride to wherever it is you're going? You don't seem to have a car."

"I'll make it there," Atlas said. He looked around for the direction in which the sun had just finished setting—west. He turned a bit to the left—south. South and Rosie's front yard. South and Florida. "And again, I thank you."

"God bless you, Mr. Robinson!" Rosie called as he walked toward the front lawn. "God bless you, Atlas!"

The boys muttered a few things that sounded like goodbye but could very well have been chili recipes.

Atlas thought for a moment about the bus station downtown, but he remembered what Sorano had told him: as long as he kept eating and didn't fall asleep, he wouldn't run out of energy. He had taken five buses, a taxi, and the only rickshaw in Tennessee to get from the Florida panhandle to Bailey, Kentucky. He would walk back.

And he kept his word. For almost 900 miles, Atlas Robinson walked south toward Florida with nothing to his name but the clothes on his back, a coin that Sorano had used to go into his mind (it hadn't helped), and an ATM card that allowed him to withdraw as much money as he needed wherever he needed without a surcharge.

Admittedly, he was better off than most ramblers of his kind.

After twenty hours and sixty miles, he discovered that he needed to stop and eat once a day, and he did—at every Waffle House or Huddle House he passed between Bailey, Kentucky and Port Meriwether, Florida. At every House, he would order a double waffle with pecans and an order of hash browns—scattered, covered, chunked, topped, capped. And he would tell amazing tales of creatures that he hadn't slain but would get around to slaying eventually. In the Employee Restroom, the Keepers of the House began drawing a new set of glyphs on the bottom of the bathroom door, depicting a man walking south, his beard growing ever-longer, his clothing growing ever-more-tattered.

At the Tennessee border, he decided he was more comfortable without shoes, so he left them there. They write in another chronicle that a young woman found them there days later and, disgusted by their smell, kicked them into a stream. They were never heard of again.

And every night he kept to the main roads, watching the sky turn like a wheel from day to night and night to day, wondering who the man up there spinning it all was. If he could hold that sky up, would he be given a break

whenever it needed to change color like this? Would he need to make way for the painters?

It rained when he reached Atlanta, and he decided to get new shoes. By the time he reached Dothan, Alabama—just north of the panhandle and Port Meriwether—he had decided he didn't need these either. By that point he had calculated the exact weight of the sky to a tenth of a pound, was wearing his blue jeans so low that they dragged behind him, and had grown a formidable beard that a more mortal man would have needed years to fill out.

He had come to terms with his failure, yet he knew someone else had succeeded. At the very least, he had demonstrated that he was good enough to take a mission abroad, even in spite of his mental deficiency and his utter inability to channel anything that even seemed like a superhuman ability—besides, of course, the ability to walk for almost two weeks without sleep. When he saw the door to his apartment drawing closer at 1:18 a.m. that Saturday morning, he felt prepared for his return to the high life. Back to slaying alien beings, back to protecting the world from the big threats. Back to the money.

But before he could touch the door, Sorano had opened it. She was scowling.

"What in the world is this?" she snapped.

Atlas laughed. He felt like a sage, with his ancient beard and his tattered clothing. He had seen things. He had encountered great visions in his travels. He had returned as a laughing sage, and he had traveled far to share such wisdom.

"I walked back," he mused. "Kid had already been exorcised."

Sorano narrowed her eyes. "Kid had already been exorcised."

"Already."

"How?"

In his mind, skeletons flipped through thick pages of dusty tomes, tomes of ancient wisdom, as old as a book that someone had made a few days prior. "No idea."

Sorano threw her arms up in the air and huffed, storming back into the apartment. "I knew this was a bad idea. I *knew* it."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Sorano! Emily! Settle down!" He darted inside after her and was not surprised to find everything exactly as he had left it, right down to the exact shape of the pile of overturned coffee on his counter and the position of the largest dust bunny under the couch relative to the others. "See, I figured it out on the way here! It wasn't my destiny to fight this war and make

things right. I was sent to Kentucky as an *observer*! You sent me there to tell you that everything was okay so that I could be given better things to do!" Sorano was heading toward a back room in the hallway but turned around, glaring something sharper than daggers into him, glaring finely cut rapiers with tips as wide as a single atom into him. For the first time since his last meal, Atlas stopped. "And let me tell you... things were just... they were..."

"When did you leave?" Sorano asked.

Atlas totaled up the figures in his head. "Twelve days, four hours, three minutes, and fifty-one seconds ago."

"And why did it take so long?"

He shrugged, looking down at himself, motioning at his filthy clothing, his bare feet rendered hard and calloused from the road, his impressive beard. "I walked."

Sorano threw her arms up in the air and stormed into a back room Atlas couldn't remember entering any time recently. When he followed her into it, he found that it was bare from ceiling to floor—a spare bedroom, bedroom not included.

"But it was a *good* walk!" he shouted. "It was a walk that made things a hell of a lot clearer than anything you've told me! And let me tell you something, Sorano, I am rea—"

But when Sorano turned around, her face was red. Not blushing-red, but a shade of red that mortal human beings do not have the capacity to process. It exists at a gap in the visible spectrum so minute that scientists have been unable to locate it or even confirm its existence. A reader who wishes to learn more about this red should imagine the fury of a deity returning to a realm of His creation after 10,000,000 years of hiatus only to find the whole of his creation collectively giving him the finger upon his return. At the last appearance of this shade of red, an entire city in the Mediterranean was swallowed up by the sea, never to be heard from again. It is a very important shade of red, and a very, very terrifying one.

"Well then, I guess we're all just done for now, huh?" she hissed, and what subtlety there was to the hiss to counterpoint the red. If Atlas had been in a more reasonable state of mind, he would have been impressed with the artisanship of Sorano's rage. "I guess because stupid, lazy, insolent Atlas couldn't find anything wrong with the kid after a day's inspection, everything's just hunky-dory in the universe, right? Leave him then—oh, and don't just leave him, walk away!"

Atlas tried to talk. Truly, he did. "...he fine."

"No," Sorano sighed, and at last returned to a shade of red less fit for ephemeral states of calculated madness. "No, he's not fine, Atlas. He's in big, big trouble. Did you even see Upsilon Turquoise while you were there?"

"Yeah!" Atlas suddenly perked up and was on his feet. "I saw him outside the Waffle House in Bailey! The one where Alice works! Oh, and she wanted me to tell you something."

Sorano sighed. "I hope it was important."

And with that, Atlas kissed her. His mind returned to the moment when Alice had done the same thing to him, and his tongue performed the maneuvers, the twirls, the kicks, the counterpoints exactly as if it had been choreographic the maneuver for years. When he was finished, Sorano wiped a bit of saliva from her cheek.

"It wasn't important," she growled. "But I'm glad to hear that she finally met up with another person from the island."

"Island?"

"The island where we come from. It's in Greece. That's what she was telling me."

"This is a complex fucking code you two have worked out."

"Code or no code, it makes no difference," Sorano said. "The point is that you've dropped the ball, you've abandoned the kid, and unless Upsilon Turquoise is chained to a mountain somewhere in the Balkans, we're all going to be in big trouble a few dozen years from now."

"Wait a second," Atlas said. He was beginning to pace. "UpsILON told me he had my back and that it'd be safe for me to leave. Are you telling me—"

"And you believed him!" Sorano buried her face in her hands. "Oh, great gods of Galatia, it was a terrible idea to expect you to pull this off! Didn't it ever occur to you that Upsilon Turquoise was the reason you were up there in the first place? Didn't it ever cross that warped warehouse of a mind of yours that Upsilon Turquoise was the one possessing the kid?"

Atlas blinked. He blinked again.

"But he couldn't lie," Atlas said. "He was standing outside the Waffle—"

Something clicked.

"*Outside the...*"

Somewhere in his mind, a skeleton had uncovered a new file—a buried one, lost at the bottom of the pile of unsorted paperwork. Upsilon Turquoise. That name. That

voice. The way he'd let himself go. Something told him it was time to ask a pivotal question.

"Sorano," he said. "Your name is Sappho, isn't it?"

She nodded, and all at once, the anger seemed to escape.

"You're not from Indianapolis or Japan. You're from Greece. You're from an island called Lesbos. And we met a long, long time ago, didn't we?"

Sappho nodded again. The anger had given way to sadness.

"Sappho, I'm not really a former intergalactic general who was in charge of facing a horde of space-insects hell-bent on consuming all of our crops... like you told me... am I?"

"That was from one of your games," she said—then, with the first bit of joy that he had seen in her for a long time, added, "How in Hades's Underworld you fell for it is beyond me, though..."

"I want to know the truth," Atlas said. "I have a feeling that the only reason you trusted me was that my mind was so far gone that I'd never remember the dirt bag I once was. And I can say that the only real thing that I got out of that walk was that I'm thinking a lot more clearly now." He took a step forward, producing the coin from his pocket. He looked over it—just like an ordinary nickel.

"Let's go into my mind again. I want to know how I lost my memory, who I was, who Upsilon Turquoise is... everything."

Sappho took the coin and turned it over in her hand. She looked up at Atlas, whose eyes were starting to well up. She knew that if there was one thing she hated more than a former dirt bag, it was a former dirt bag on the verge of a bleary-eyed realization of his own dirt-baggishness.

When she put the coin to his forehead, Atlas found himself in the Psi-Room again, and it wasn't long before he was staring up at a mountain in Greece.

Below the mountain, a war was brewing. It didn't matter who the sides were; they were all huge, bearded, and armed to the teeth with the forces of nature, which they would use to batter each other violently about the head and shoulders. One of them took a lightning bolt to the teeth and fell tumbling down the mountain like an avalanche. Another swung a continent at the man with the lightning and missed, tumbling to the ground. In the end, it didn't matter which side had won and which side had lost except for the fact that a Titan named Atlas had lost.

Things flashed forward quickly, and there was Atlas on the edge of the world, huge and impressive, probably scores

of miles tall (but creatures were larger in those times), holding the sky on his back. He sweated a clean sweat that fell to the earth like rain, and the sky grew cloudy with his boredom and vexation, while one of the bearded men who had won the battle laughed thunder and lightning across the sky.

He heard himself whisper to Sappho, "But you told me I wasn't *that* Atlas."

"I lied," she whispered back. "Pardon me for not thinking the former amnesiac was ready to hear a story of how he held the sky up a few eons ago."

Things flashed forward again, and Atlas saw himself suddenly leave his post for a man even burlier, even larger, and even more impressive-looking. Atlas, meanwhile, climbed a nearby mountain that stretched to Mars and found a great black dragon on top. For three weeks he battled the beast and pinned it to the ground, retrieving the apples that it guarded. He then ventured back down the mountain, apples in hand, and returned to his post.

Here Atlas could hear the words exchanged. Though the ancient tongue is lost, a rough translation can be achieved:

"So, Herakles, how about you just hang out here and I'll take these back for you? You know, it's a long way

back to Eurystheus, and, you know, I'm already holding the apples and all."

"Oh, sure, Atlas, that sounds like a reeeeeeeeeeeally nice idea. So I'll just stay here and keep holding the sky up for you then while you run off with those apples?"

"...Herakles. Listen. I said I'd take them to Eurystheus for you."

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. Hey, sure, no problem. But would you mind taking the sky for a minute so I could adjust my cloak for the next gajillion (a loose translation) years while you go run this errand?"

"Oh, yeah, no problem. Here, let me take that from you."

And so Herakles handed the sky back to Atlas, picked up the apples, and ran.

"Dipshit." Again, a loose translation.

And so Atlas continued to hold the sky up, and every once in a while, a traveler would come and take the sky from him for a moment, only to trick him into taking it back again. Though records from Greece only record this incident happening once, the myth of Herakles (or, as you people who can't sort out your Greeks and your Romans call him, *Hercules*) is in fact a representation of every single

time someone had taken the sky for Atlas. During this retelling of his life, he counted forty-six times.

"So where does Upsilon Turquoise come into this? When does he trick me?" Atlas heard himself whispering.

"...who? What?" Sappho whispered back.

"Upsilon Turquoise. You know, ugly guy."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry, I was enjoying watching this again."

And with that, the scene suddenly shifted again to another part of the world, sometime in a point in the future when men were suddenly no longer scores of miles tall and were, in fact, about six-five or six-six at the tallest. It was on this field that a small army had gathered beneath a cliff, taking in bread and meat. Their weapons seemed to be Iron Age, but something about the era led Atlas to believe that a young man named Jesus had not yet shown up and told everyone to just relax and start suffering the little children already. In fact, even if he had, no one in this field seemed ready to relax and suffer anything except for arrow wounds to the chest.

Moments later, they did.

In modern times, it would be very difficult to convince anyone that sky blue is a terrifying color. Everything about it seems to scream safety, security, and

the edge of a bassinet. In fact, in ancient Greece, before the rise of Alexander the Great and the unification of the city-states, few things were more terrifying than seeing a few lines in the sky flecked across a field of sky blue. Moments later, the lines would swoop down, and the camouflage would be revealed as the ruse it was. Sky blue-turquoise, as it were—was the official color of the Sky-Riders of Macedon, the first mortal human civilization to master the power of flight.

Of course, mortal though they were, their leader was not—a cunning general with a name so terrible that the human tongue no longer has the phonetic capacity to pronounce it. A burly man with a voice like a starving vulture, he would swoop in at the head of his army, axe in hand, and destroy all in his path, cackling madly. It is said that those who swung at him would find themselves only cutting his glider in twain before they suddenly felt an overwhelming compulsion toward defection. It was with this trick—the power of possession—that the unspeakable name of this barbarian general spread unspoken throughout the lands to the south.

Of course, little of that mattered when the Greeks finally determined that by lighting their own arrows on fire, they could turn that cloud of blue into a cloud of

orange, and before long, battlefield after battlefield was littered with the bodies of the Sky-Riders of Macedon, broken after falling several hundred feet.

Those who remained—including the general himself—were rounded up and captured, forced to wear bright turquoise robes on the ground where they did them no good. To further dehumanize them, the Greeks assigned them simple letter names, for they had just invented an alphabet and they were damn well ready to put it to good use. And so the nomenclature continued with letter and color—Alpha Turquoise, Beta Turquoise, Gamma Turquoise, Delta Turquoise—and lost in the middle somewhere, the fearful general whose name could not be uttered. Upsilon Turquoise.

He kept the name, even as the old Greek name for that color died out. He refined it into English, still keeping the Greek letter to remind him of his captors. And it was an old French version of that name—Upsilon Turquoise—that he finally gave the strongman at the edge of the world when he discovered him centuries later.

Here Atlas could hear the talking again, and although this particular dialect of French is mostly lost, it can once again be roughly translated.

"Listen, big man, did you ever wonder why they need you to hold the sky up?"

"No, Mr. Turquoise, I haven't. Not at all. If I don't hold the sky up, it'll fall."

Upsilon whacked him across the head.

"No, moron, it won't fall. It's bolted up there. Hell, it's not even a physical thing. It's just empty space."

"Oh yeah, smart guy? Then why's it so heavy?"

"It's so heavy because you want it to be so heavy. How long have you been at this, 2,000 years? 3,000? 4,000? And you haven't figured out that you're not actually holding anything up?"

"You're wrong. Zeus told me I was holding up the sky."

"Yeah, and you trust Zeus."

The old Atlas looked up at the sky for a minute, then down at the earth again. Finally, he put the sky down, and he was amazed to find that the entire earth was not squashed flat. In fact, nothing was different aside from the fact that there was no longer a muscular man on an island in the Atlantic straining under the weight of nothing.

"You're Atlas, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"I thought you were just a legend."

"No, not at all."

"Okay then, Atlas, the way I figure it, the world owes you a living. A few thousand livings, in fact. And I'm going to tell you this right now: this isn't a time anymore where your muscles are going to get you by. So let's work on that mind, because there isn't much there."

And so things once again began to move quickly, and Atlas watched himself training under Upsilon Turquoise, refining his mind, learning to read the thoughts and intentions of others, learning to manipulate those thoughts and intentions. And over the eons, his muscular physique waned, his long hair was joined by an equally long beard, and his schemes throughout history became clear. If he was to be punished by such petty inconveniences for millennia—and then to watch as the popular perception of his labor became that of myth or legend—he would take it on himself to create a whole new set of petty inconveniences for the human race. And so through the eons, Atlas and Upsilon had a hand in the creation of the parts of the Swiss Army knife that always stick, the placement of the melting point of butter so close to the burning point, the United States Department of Motor Vehicles, and lawyers (though television shows that glorify lawyers seemed to come much later). They also managed to add fifteen new, fragile parts

to the burgeoning automobile that weren't necessary but were still expensive.

And somewhere along the line—Atlas couldn't tell when—they added a woman to their group. A smoldering woman. A tall, leggy woman with red hair just a step into sinful. A woman of ample chest and evil demeanor. A woman Atlas was sure he'd never seen before.

"Who's that?" Atlas heard himself whisper.

"I think her name is Lucretia," Sappho said.

"What do you know about her?"

"...she looks very tasty."

"Well, yeah, I can see that too. What do *I* know about her then?"

Behind the whispering, Atlas heard the rustling of papers. And every once in a while, as he watched the memories pass, gaps seemed to appear, huge jumps in logic that the storytelling section of his mind should have known better than to include. They didn't occur at any particular points or for any particular reason—they were just gone.

"I think you really wrecked this part of your brain," he finally heard Sappho say.

"Well, that doesn't make sense then," he said. "If I've found Upsilon Turquoise, and if he's the one who was possessing the kid, then what happened to Lucretia?"

Again, more paper sounds. "You don't know. I only met her once, so I don't know, either."

"But she must be somewhere. What in the world could she be doing?"

And then a memory flashed for a moment of the woman and Atlas on the floor of a hotel room, her stretched out beneath him, him on top, writhing in unimaginable ecstasy. He heard a squeal of delight from the woman.

He had heard it before.

He knew who she was.

XIV: LUCRETIA

In a Kentucky that was very real and not a video-style representation of the abstract concept of thought, Rosie Roth was up at dawn, watering the petunias before breakfast. She felt well-rested, and it had been wonderful seeing the boys again. She was sad to know they'd be leaving, but she could still visit Connor later in the day if he wanted, and they could play the piano and read the Bible together. If he liked those video games, then he'd definitely love a story of real-life heroes like David slaying the giant, or Samson knocking down the heathen temple, or Paul crashing his ship in Malta.

Her only regret was that she hadn't been able to convince Atlas to stay, but whatever he was doing seemed so important. Rosie thought he looked very tired and very confused, like a man who had been wandering in the dark for hundreds of years.

"Lord, let Your light guide him where he needs to go," she whispered, her eyes closed, her watering can tipped

down. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice told her she'd see him again.

And somewhere at the back of her neck, a voice told her hello.

"Hello, um, Mrs. Roth?"

The tone of the voice was familiar but the coherence of it wasn't, because Rosie had barely heard that voice utter a sentence before. When she turned around, she found herself face-to-face with Connor's stepmother, Felicity Thatcher-Ensor. She was wearing a robe, a clueless expression, and a pair of headphones.

"Oh, why, hello, Mrs. *Ensor*!" Rosie said with a lilt. "How are you on this lovely Monday morning?"

"Um, yeah," Felicity said, which was almost an answer. "Could you, um, come over for a second? We, um, need to, like, talk about, um, you know, um, Connor."

"Oh, of course!" Rosie said, laying the watering can on the lawn. "Would you like to meet my boys? I can go inside and get them!"

"Um, like, no?" Felicity said. "We just, um, want to, you know, talk to you for a minute. About, um, you know, Jesus?"

At that exact moment, a chill breeze swept over Rosie's lawn, but she was in too much joy to interpret it

as anything but a cool refreshing blast of the word of God—just the sort she had been waiting to blow for some time.

"I would be delighted!" she said, nodding quickly.

"Um, good," Felicity said. "C'mon."

As she led Rosie across the lawn and toward the Ensor house, Rosie whispered, "Thank you, Lord." She had brought Connor to Christ, she had brought Atlas away from the false idol of Catholicism and toward the one true God, and now, the time had come to bring Clark and Felicity to the Lord! Four conversions in two days—she felt like Paul!

Inside the house, Felicity led Rosie to the far wall of their exquisitely appointed living room, where she opened a door to a stairway down. She flipped on a light, and a single bulb flickered on above the staircase—an oddly terrifying room in what was otherwise, Rosie thought, a beautiful house. Felicity helped Rosie to the stairs and down, and Rosie watched as the mood turned from deep blue silk furniture and ornately carved end tables to a rickety wooden floor and plain white walls.

"So what's down here, dearie?" Rosie asked, her voice shaking a bit.

"Second den," Felicity said. There was something new in her voice this time. Not only was she coherent, but she

was confident, and she was speaking louder than a whisper. "Your presence is imperative."

"Well, I for one am just glad to finally hear you speaking like a lady!" Rosie said. She tried to force a laugh, but for the first time in the past few days, it wasn't coming. "All of those 'likes' and 'you knows' and 'ums' aren't necessary... um... you know."

But Felicity didn't answer. She only walked.

"Yes, well... it certainly is..."

"If you are attempting to pique my interest in small talk, I will not grant you the courtesy."

Rosie bit her lower lip and huffed. She'd have to be nice, after all, if they were going to come over to the side of the Lord. So she did what she always did: she put on the full armor of God. The Helmet of the Ever-Present Smile. The Breastplate of Self-Denial. The Shield of Patience. The unerringly accurate Sword of Longwinded Storytelling, tempered in the white-hot forges of cheerful laughter.

"Oh, you needn't be that way, dearie!" Rosie said with a laugh. "I just got you to talk now, and all of a sudden you don't want to? Why, we have plenty to talk about, I'm sure! Like Jesus, like you said. Did you know that He died for your sins, Mrs. Ensor, in the same way He died for my

sins and my husband Rusty's sins? Why, Rusty's in Heaven right now thanks to Jesus!"

"Your husband is not with Jesus. He is ours already."

Rosie lowered her brow, watching as the Shield of Patience began to chip away. "Now that's just not true! He loved the Lord with all his heart, and he loved—"

"He loved you," Felicity interrupted. "That I can say for certain. He loved you more than he loved me, I would wager."

"Oh. Oh?" Rosie stammered. She was beginning to wonder just how far down this staircase went. Everything was so old and dusty, and the light bulb dangling near the top seemed very far away. She thought she must have misheard. "Oh, well, Rusty was a good God-fearing man, so of course, he felt God's love toward all people..."

"He also loved me between the sheets."

"You kiss your mother with that mouth, Mrs. Ensor?" Rosie snapped.

"Actually, if you observe the signs, they add up perfectly," Felicity said. "I entered Rusty Roth's bedroom for the first time on July 8, 1974. I offered him Form 918-38b-Phi, a Standard Contract for Soul Ownership, as per my authority as succubus and merchant in the most powerful fuel source in the arcane arts: the human soul. As per Mr.

Roth's requests, I assisted him in the conception of three gifted, handsome, intelligent sons and engaged in acts of carnality with him on seven separate occasions. That he failed to read the fine print of those contracts is none of my concern."

Rosie was thoroughly confused but still angry enough to ignore it. "It still isn't right for you to say you did such—"

"The orange marks on his face were a result of the vitality burns endured when I began to acquire his soul several years later. As per the terms of his contract—which he had obviously failed to read thoroughly—I had the right to claim his soul at any time. I selected December 5, 1991. The extraction occurred over the course of three carnal acts between December 5, 1991 and April 17, 1992, at which point Rusty Roth passed away." From seemingly out of nowhere, Felicity produced a piece of paper and thrust it into Rosie's hands. "It is all here—binding and perfectly legal—if you wish to peruse it."

Rosie glanced over the sheet for a moment, a yellowish sheet of parchment. The text on the parchment was flowery and too small to be legible and was stamped in the center by red ink written in a language Rosie didn't understand.

At the bottom of the sheet, in large letters, was the one legible word: a signature.

"Lucretia," Felicity said. "My name is Lucretia, and we are at the basement."

Rosie took an awkward step, anticipating the stairs to continue a bit more but instead finding the ground beneath her, and she stumbled. Felicity flipped the light switch on to reveal a bare room, utterly devoid of furniture except for a single easel and a dried-up palette. On the palette was a painting of a complex series of concentric circles, each one covered with tiny green dots. As Rosie looked at the dots, they appeared to move.

Of course, that was strange. And what was stranger was that when Rosie looked for the contract in her hand, it was gone. And when she looked for Felicity, she was also gone.

In her place was a tall, curvaceous woman, just a shade over six feet tall, her fiery red hair tied back into a Japanese bun. She wore a gray pinstripe business suit with a skirt that did only a serviceable job of covering her long legs, and in her hand was a briefcase.

"Did Mrs. Ensor leave?" Rosie said. She was actually a bit relieved: she had become both insane and disturbingly intelligent. Rosie couldn't make a lick of sense of all of her talk of vitalogies and sunkubuses and Lucretians. It

was a bit strange that she had managed to guess the date Rusty had died, though.

Rosie decided she had already told her and left it at that. She still thought it very rude of her to say such things about her Rusty, though.

"And who might you be, dearie?" Rosie said with a smile. "My name is Rosie Roth, and I'm afraid it looks like our host Mrs. Ensor has stepped out for a minute. Did you see where she went?"

The tall woman rolled her eyes. "Mrs. Roth, Felicity Thatcher-Ensor is—"

"An awful name, isn't it?" Rosie interrupted. "My, it's awfully unladylike of her not to take her husband's name like that! And she's so young, too! She seems like she could be a sweet lady, though—just a little misguided. She can say such cruel things sometimes!"

"Mrs. Roth, Felicity Thatcher-Ensor is—"

"Oh, I know, I know, I shouldn't say those things. Love your neighbor and all that. And I thank the Lord that He gives me the strength to—"

"I am Felicity Thatcher-Ensor!"

Rosie looked over the woman from head to toe and laughed. "Oh, don't be silly! You're much too tall to be—"

Right before Rosie's eyes, the woman shrank away, her figure seemed to suck itself inward, and her clothing transformed into the blue jeans and plain white T-shirt that Felicity had been wearing. A moment later, Felicity stood before Rosie, and just as quickly, she transformed back into the tall woman.

"Oh, that's an interesting magic trick!" Rosie said with glee. "Have you ever heard of a fellow named David Copperfield? He does the most amazing magic trick, and I always wonder how he does it! I guess you can't tell me, can you? Magicians have to have their secrets and—"

"I am a demon, Mrs. Roth."

"No, you're not, dearie, you're just misinformed."

"No, Mrs. Roth," the tall woman said, sighing. "I *am* a demon. As I said, my name is Lucretia, and my sort of people are commonly described by those of Judaeo-Christian faiths as demons."

Rosie felt a chill run down her spine as Lucretia (a much nicer name than Thatcher-Ensor, she thought) said it. There was a calculated cruelty in her voice, the sort that may not visit torment upon mankind but definitely manages the budgeting and logistics of that torment, callously categorizing genocide in the "Miscellaneous" folder and calculating how many scourges her forces can afford while

still keeping the Olympic-sized swimming pool for themselves. Rosie turned back to the painting, with its swirling green dots, watching the green light it cast on Lucretia's face. All of a sudden, she knew.

"Demon," Rosie whispered. "Demon!"

"Your silence is required," she said. "Now that we have reached an understanding, we may begin."

Just then, from the shadows, two people stepped next to the easel. The short, stocky man was the same one Atlas had seen outside of the Waffle House the day before. He was holding onto Connor's shoulders. Connor's head was hung—he was probably still asleep even though he was still standing.

"Hi, Rosie, how you doing?" the man said. "Upsilon Turquoise is the name. Atlas calls me Upsy because he's my friend. Lucretia calls me Upsy because she's sexy."

"I have never called you Upsy," Lucretia said, glaring at Upsilon.

"You should," Upsilon replied. "It'd be sexy."

"No."

Upsilon grunted and snapped in Rosie's direction. "Well, you're not my friend and you're about as sexy as a bowl of mashed potatoes! So you call me Upsilon Turquoise! Nothing else! Got it?"

Rosie took a step forward, looking at Connor. She saw orange marks on his cheeks in the shapes of hands—the same hideous shade of orange that Rusty had developed. “Mr. Turquoise...”

“Upsilon Turquoise!” he suddenly yelled, and the blast of air knocked Rosie into the wall, and she felt her spine ache at the blow. “It’s Upsilon Turquoise, you dumb old broad! Call me anything other than that and I snap you the fuck in half!”

“Upsilon, calm down,” Felicity said. “Mrs. Roth is not our target; she is merely a witness. If you are this anxious to pressure someone, pressure—”

“Felicity!” the shout came from the top of the stairs, and Rosie recognized it. It felt incredibly distant, but the sound of footsteps was quick.

“Down here, Clark!” Felicity called, opening her briefcase and producing another piece of parchment. She looked up at Rosie for a moment, regarded her indifferently, and returned to the parchment.

“D-demon.” The only word Rosie could manage. “Demon,” she whispered. She wanted to scream it, but something was quelling her will to do so. Was it fear? She didn’t know; she couldn’t ever remember being afraid before.

"Again, that is merely your culture's interpretation of what I am," Lucretia said. "I selected the name Felicity because it appealed to Clark Ensor. He also liked short, bony, airheaded women with fake tans who looked just a day over eighteen. I could do that too, you know. I bet I could even find a woman's shape that you liked."

"Demon," Rosie whispered. Then, all of a sudden, she clutched the spirit of God against her heart. She knew the signs that would accompany those who believed in Him: in His name, they would cast out demons. They would cast out demons. She screamed. "Demon, be GONE! In the name of Jesus Christ and God Almighty, BE GONE!"

Lucretia didn't move or even wince. Connor didn't wake up. The only thing in the room that reacted was the painting, which seemed to shake. She waited for Lucretia to suddenly become enveloped in flame and disappear into the ground below her. Or for the ceiling to open up and the glory of God to shine into that basement, to turn this creature—this abomination of curves and red hair—into a pile of dust. Or a pillar of salt. Or something. Anything.

"What's going on, babe? You having a party or what?"

Rosie felt a thick, leathery hand on her shoulder and turned to see Clark standing there in a thick red cotton bathrobe, his hair slicked back even at this early hour.

"Mrs. Roth, what are you doing here? Are we having a party? What's going on?" He turned to see Lucretia, who was now over six feet tall of pure, terrifying sex. "You all right, babe? You do something to your hair? You wearing heels? What's going on?"

"Be quiet, Clark," she hissed. "You and I need to talk, and I want to make sure Rosie hears every word of this. Now have a seat."

Clark looked to the left of him, then to the right, then behind him. "But there's no place to—"

"Sit on the floor then."

And he did—such was the power of that voice. Rosie thought when she spoke that she heard several voices—maybe dozens. But unlike the commanding voice of Lucretia, these were desperate, howling voices of those driven mad. Rosie shuddered.

"Now then, Mr. Ensor," Lucretia began. "We must talk about your son, Connor. He is very important to me, you see, and to my friend."

"Upsilon Turquoise," Upsilon chimed in, offering a wave. "Lucretia can call me Upsy because—"

"And that is why I found you," she said, her thin lips slowly upturning to a smirk. "And that is why I engaged in

sexual intercourse with you on several occasions now. And that is why I married you: because we need your son."

Before she could continue, Clark slowly, nervously put his hand up. He waited for her to offer an approving nod before speaking. "So... why didn't you look like that until just now? You're much sexier now, you know."

"Because," she answered without hesitating. "You are afraid of women who look like this, Clark. You are terrified of a woman who's taller and smarter and better looking than you. Eighteen and stupid and covered with a fake tan is the ideal woman for Clark Mabel Ensor." She stepped in front of him and bent over, letting her tongue curl from her lips like a snake. At last Rosie could see that it was forked, but she was too terrified to comment on it. "I would never have come after you without knowing you better than you know yourself, Clark. A woman like me would have sent you packing faster than the upper management of the last company you acquired. Felicity Thatcher, though..." She rose to full height and nodded. "You almost loved Felicity Thatcher. And I am prepared to let you have me for even longer—for the rest of your life, even. All I need is your son."

"You can't have Connor!" Rosie snapped in a sudden pique of bravery. "You can't take him away from his father! It ain't right! It ain't right at all!"

And at once—whether it was the approach of Lucretia and Upsilon or her sudden realization of her use of the word "ain't"—Rosie was dumbstruck. She shrank back to the wall again.

"He's a good boy," she managed to squeak. "He's going to be a great man someday." She tried to continue, but her vocal cords stopped working. She suddenly realized that it was not her fear that was stopping her but something else. It was as if Lucretia could control when she was able to speak and was doing so with cold dramatic flair, allowing Rosie's cries to provide the counterpoint for the grim proceedings.

Upsilon laughed a hearty, nasally laugh. "Hey, did you get that, Lucy? Old lady got one right! Of course he's gonna be a great man someday, moron! It's been prophesied! Kid's got the potential to be the most powerful creature in the universe, even! He'll learn whatever you teach him! He can pick it up in a minute! It's called the Gift of the Greatest Apprentice, and it assures that this kid can change the world! And he's gonna do it! And we're gonna take him there!" He let loose with the nasally laugh again.

It filled the room, echoed through the basement, before being swallowed up by the sheer length of the staircase. When he was finished, everyone in the room was staring at him. Even Rosie found the silence awkward.

"Well then," Lucretia said. "If you are quite finished tipping our hand, I suppose I can cut to the chase." She turned to Clark, standing over him, looking down into those eyes. Rosie swore she grew a bit. "Now, Clark. As the only living biological parent of a boy who has not yet reached an age of consent, you are free to place him under the care and consent of another under Supernatural Code 852.819-Aleph-Omicron-B, and in accordance with errata heretofore adapted into the above laws since their inception. As such, my accomplice, Upsilon Turquoise of the Sky-Riders of Macedon, under the auspices of Lucretia of Fire Island, does hereby—"

"Wait," Clark said. "Fire Island?"

"Oh, it's a different Fire Island," Upsilon jumped in. "This one's in the Mediterranean—or it was, anyway, until it was swallowed up with Atlantis. And it wasn't some resort island, either. It was actually on fire." He nodded with a grin crossing his face. "Yeah, that's right. Woman comes from an island that was perpetually *on fire*. You don't want to cross her, so I suggest you—"

"—under the *auspices of Lucretia of Fire Island*," she growled, "does hereby request full custody of Connor Logan Ensor, son of Clark Mabel Ensor, of the Ensor family of Brussels, Belgium, to raise and teach in accordance with the Revised Laws of the Cosmos, Article LXI, Section 58, and in accordance with errata heretofore adapted into the above laws since their inception. In short, hand Connor over to Upsilon, keep the old lady away from him, and I will keep giving you the best sex of your life." She pulled a pair of glasses from her breast pocket and looked at the parchment again. "I will also engage in any number of sexual acts about which you have fantasized but never spoken, including the use of Matchbox cars as a sexual aide. I will even transform into a man just once so you can satisfy your own curiosity."

Rosie shot Clark an evil look, and he blushed. She wanted to admonish him, but her voice still wouldn't work.

Now." Clark suddenly stood up, but with a quick, jerky motion, like something else was compelling him to do so. "Do you, in the sight of this mortal witness, agree to these terms?"

Rosie's scowl turned to something else when she saw the weakness cross Clark's face. He was conflicted—a remarkable feat, given that Rosie was prepared to think

he'd hand his son over without even a word. Rosie prayed in her head. *Lord, let him make the right choice...*

"Well," Clark began, "I, uh... I don't know what to say." He looked up at her, and Rosie closed her eyes. She prayed. She prayed like Moses praying to soften the heart of the Pharaoh. She prayed for the futile, the impossible odds.

"...no, I can't."

She smiled. *Nothing is impossible to those who believe*, she thought.

"I'm sorry, Felicity. I like you, but I really do love my son." He turned to face the boy, who was lying on his back on the cold stone floor, still asleep. "I wouldn't trade him for the world."

Lucretia paused. She put her fingers to her chin, still undaunted. Countless eons of evolution and dirty deeds seemed to fly through those eyes at once. Then, all of a sudden, her smile came back.

"I do not think you quite realize what that phrase really means, Clark," she said. "You claim to be unwilling to trade him for the world, but have you ever really been offered the world?"

Clark stammered. "Well, I—"

"The world then. We will be well on our way to capturing it with him on our side anyway. You give us custody of him, and when the time comes... we will give you the world."

The confidence in her voice is what most shook Rosie to the core. There was not a shred of doubt that if the world wasn't hers to give already, it would be soon. She concentrated back on God, on the one who holds the future, but here in this basement, so deep underground, so far away from the sun and the sky and her petunias, He seemed far, far away.

"We hardly need it, really," Lucretia said. "We will have him, after all. And he will be enough. So yes, ask yourself again, Clark: would you trade him for the world? I think you would. The world would listen to you. It would have to, after all."

Rosie recalled a passage in the Bible at this point when Jesus was wandering in the wilderness—she couldn't remember which Gospel it was exactly, but it was in there. Satan took Jesus to a mountain and showed him the cities and kingdoms of the world, and he offered them to Jesus in exchange for his servitude. Though she would dare not admit it, it was the only part of the Bible Rosie had ever asked questions about: if God was sovereign, and if he ruled over

all the world, how could Satan have offered Jesus—the son of God, the very manifestation of God in the flesh—the kingdoms of the world? It didn't make sense to her. It never did. And yet to hear Lucretia talk about the world as if it was a candy in her side pocket...

God, protect me, she thought. She dared not pray aloud.

"Now if you give me the world," Clark said, "are you still gonna have sex with me?"

"Whenever you want," Lucretia said.

Clark looked up at his bride, who in presence if not in stature had now filled the room. He looked at the grinning fat man who stood over his son. And he looked down at Connor Ensor, asleep on the ground. The world. The whole damn world.

"In that case, yeah, take him," he said. "But I hope you'll take care of him. I know he's a hassle sometimes, but he really is a good kid. Smart, too."

"I know," Lucretia said. She turned back to Upsilon and nodded, and the fat man placed his hands to his forehead. Moments later, he had vanished. At the same time, Rosie saw the painting flash for a moment, and several of the pinpoints of green light went dark. A second later, Connor was rising to his feet, a twisted grin overflowing off the sides of his face.

It was the same grin Rosie had seen on him the second time she babysat him.

"Now, witness," Lucretia hissed, turning back to Rosie. With each step closer to the old lady, she grew a bit larger, still more malevolent. Her tongue had split into a fork, and her eyes had begun to glow a bright shade of red. "If you are shocked to find my appearance dissimilar to that of a demon, then observe." Horns sprouted from her forehead, which was nearly to the ceiling now. "This image is, of course, a misunderstanding, an attempt by mortal minds to rationalize that which cannot be rationalized. However, I wish to assume it as I give you your instructions. Go home. Wake your sons up. Tell them what you have witnessed this day. Tell them that the neighbor's wife is a demon. Tell them that I have become a monstrous demon, a hellspawn. Tell them of the acts of carnality in which Atlas and I have engaged, and tell them that I will fuck him in a different way if I see him again. Atlas is a demon too, you know."

"No," Rosie whispered. She fell to the ground on her backside, backpedaling to the wall. "You're lying. You devil. You deceiver. Be gone. In Jesus's name." It had seemed so easy in the Bible for Jesus or Peter or one of the disciples to cast out demons, but Rosie found the

actual act much more difficult when she was staring deep into the Abyss-like eyes of a creature three times her size and growing, a creature unmoved by her pleas.

"Oh, yes, he is. He left you here alone, when he had the power to help you. Of course he could have stopped me, but he chose not to. Tell your sons that, too. Tell them that the reign of Connor Ensor, the ten-year-old boy next door, has begun, and his fury shall sweep across the land like a hurricane and leave nothing but death in his wake."

"No!" Rosie shrieked. The demon was descending on her—she seemed miles tall now. Rosie curled down, her hand covering her eyes. "In JESUS'S name!" That hot breath. That sinister cackling. "In JESUS'S name! In JESUS'S name! In JESUS'S name!"

"Mom!"

"IN JESUS'S NAME!"

"Mom! Calm down! Mom!"

Rosie looked up and opened her eyes. She looked around slowly, her eyes squinting in the now-present light of the sun. She was hunched over on her front lawn, the watering can overturned next to her. Above her, the triplets stood, watching. At the sight of them, she jumped to her feet, grabbing the nearest one by the shoulders—it took her a moment to realize it was Larry.

"Oh, thank God!" she shrieked. "Boys! Boys! We have a problem! The-the woman next door... she's not really a woman! She's a DEMON! A DEMON!"

Larry turned and looked at Barry, who shrugged. He looked at Gary, who also shrugged.

"Mom, are you okay?" Gary asked.

"Did you pass out?" Larry inquired.

"Did you get too much sun?" Barry demanded.

"Did you—"

"Be quiet! Hush!" Rosie pushed Larry away and ran toward the front door, nearly tripping on the doorstep. "We have to call the pastor! We have to call the head of the church! We have to call somebody! Oh, boys, pray, pray, pray! I'm telling you, there's a demon next door, and she's taken the soul of that poor boy Connor! She's gonna have that poor boy running nations down like hurricanes by tomorrow morning! Oh, boys, pray with me! Pray!"

And with that, one leg in the house, the other leg out, Rosie was on her knees. She mumbled, she wept, she prayed in the Spirit, she babbled, she fell over, she got back up again, she babbled, she mumbled, she wept.

The triplets, simultaneously, turned to the neighbor's house. The Ensors—all three of them—were on their front

porch, eyes wide. Felicity pulled Connor close to her and thrust his face into her leg. He seemed to be crying.

They turned back to Rosie on the front step, and they need not have said another word. Something had gone wrong. Maybe it was the loneliness. Maybe if they had just called more, it might not have happened. But it had. And they had to find someone to help them handle it.

Rosie Mary Roth had lost her mind. For the first time in years, the boys were in tacit agreement.

XV: THOR AND LOKI

"Connor's in trouble," Atlas said.

"Well, you certainly are the swift one," Sappho replied.

"I'm going to do something about it," Atlas announced.

"And responsible, too."

Atlas wanted to make sure he was ready. He had packed his priestly vestments again, even though he wasn't sure he needed them. He knew that the exorcism had worked by throwing into chaos the souls that the possessing unit had enslaved—just reminding them that they were, in fact, serving a demon was usually enough to throw things into disarray. In his gut, he knew that Upsilon would anticipate this attack, but it felt good having it all around just in case.

"I don't remember a lot about Lucretia other than the fact that she's dangerous and that she is the mother of all lawyers," Atlas said. "That makes her doubly dangerous. I have a feeling she's going to try to bargain with Connor's dad."

"And what do you know about him?"

"He's a jerk," Atlas said. "And an idiot. And greedy. And he has a bigger dick than me."

Sappho decided not to ask.

"But the point is that I left a big damn mess up there, and I need to set it right," he added. "All I want to know is this. If all of that shit about the Armor-Beasts was a lie, then how'd I really lose my memory? And how'd you really turn into a cat?"

Sappho sighed. She drew the coin out once again that would allow her to visit the Psi-Room, looking it over. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"I am."

"It's the reason why I knew you had to go, knowing full well your past."

"I need to know."

"And it's pretty silly."

That wasn't what Atlas was expecting to hear. "I still need to know."

Sappho shrugged. "Okay."

It wasn't long before Atlas found himself watching something very similar to what had happened on the wall of the bathroom stall, only clearer and without the benefit of

Morgan Freeman. The first-ever Waffle House in Decatur, Georgia was a nice, clean place and brimming with that 1950's roadside café charm. Customers were lined up at the door, each waiting for their turn to sample the greasy cuisine. A group of thick-bodied Norsemen, hunkered over slices of pie, discussed the terms of a peace. And Atlas was walking up to a bar stool where a dark-haired Greek woman was sitting: Sappho.

"Hey," he said, "aren't you that lesbian poet?"

The greeting was either 2,000 years after its time or 50 years before it, depending on your perspective. She turned around and scowled.

"Hey, aren't you that moron who thought that the sky would fall if you didn't hold it up?" Sappho snapped. "What do they call you? Chicken Little?"

"Cute," he said. "You're going to help me."

She glared at him. "Why should I help you?"

"Because I need you to write an epic about me."

Sappho turned back to her coffee. "I don't do epics."

"Did you ever try?"

"No, and I'm not about to start. Look, why do you need an epic written about you anyway?"

Atlas shuffled his feet. "I-I need to impress a woman."

"Write her a love poem then." She sipped her coffee.

"But that won't work!" Atlas insisted. At the Norsemen's table, a shouting match had broken out. A waitress tried to smooth things over with pie, but pie can only last for so long in negotiations. "She's impressed with power and history! All I need you to do is record my deeds in an impressive way. Her name is Lucretia. She's very beautiful."

Sappho sighed and turned around again. "Why does it have to be me?"

"She's a big fan of your work," Atlas said. "And that was her condition—she would be monogamous only if I could get you to write me an epic poem."

"Uh... huh," Sappho said. "And it didn't occur to you that this might be one of those impossible tasks a woman sets up when she's not interested in that kind of a relationship?"

Atlas was confused, so Sappho rephrased it.

"You're still not the sharpest knife in the drawer, are you? Can't detect when a woman is jerking your chain?"

Atlas was confused again, so Sappho rephrased it in a different way.

"Pay me whatever I want, and I'll do it."

With that, Atlas reached into his pocket and produced a plastic card, which he handed to her.

"Do you know Daedalus?" he asked.

"We've met," she replied.

"Daedalus says that in just a few years, this card will be able to give you as much money as you want whenever you want. The technology isn't being used yet, but he knows it's going to be a hit. And you know how Daedalus is with predicting these things."

Sappho looked over the card. One of the Norsemen shouted something obscene in ancient Saxon. "Not bad."

"He's also working on some kind of game you can play with these new television sets. He says it's fifty years or so ahead of its time, but when it finally does come out, the actual machine is going to break down and cost people a lot of money." He motioned back toward the Norsemen. "He says it's because of some curse that group brought upon the world."

"Strange," Sappho said. "Well, if you insist, I'll—"

It was at that moment that one of the Norsemen let fly with a bolt of magic, which was apparently meant to hit a muscular blonde man that Atlas guessed must have been Thor. The bolt instead struck Sappho, who began to glow dull white. The patrons and the staff didn't pay attention; they'd been to enough greasy spoon joints to know that the

weirdos hung out there sometimes, and the less attention paid to them, the better.

A few seconds later, Sappho was a cat.

"Oh, no," the Norseman said. Atlas looked down at Sappho and snickered, then back at the Norseman.

"You see there?" Thor roared. "That's what happens! That's why we need peace! Innocent people keep getting stuck in the crossfire, and then you won't have any more innocent people to harass, Loki!"

Atlas picked up the cat that was Sappho, who growled at him. He fiddled with her mind a bit; Upsilon had taught him how to manipulate curses, and he locked Sappho in that form until he dismissed it himself. The Norsemen, who had returned to their shouting, didn't notice as he slipped out the door.

"I'm going to let you go," Atlas said, "but only if you write my poem for free."

The cat growled.

"You give me back the card when you turn back," he said, "and I'll turn you back into a human. And you'll write me my poem. And Lucretia will be mine."

Atlas peered into the cat's mind, communicating with him in that way for a moment.

"Do we have a deal?" he thought to her.

"The second you let me out of this form, I'm gone," she thought back to him. "I'm not stupid. I have something you want, and you've ruined any chances of ever getting that from me."

"I could just use my powers to control your mind," he thought.

"Yeah, idiot, except then you'd be telling me what to write. You'd be writing the poem, not me."

Atlas blinked. Obviously, he hadn't thought this far ahead. "Well, what if I turn you back and apologize?"

"No good," she thought. "You've shown that you're a crook, and I don't work for crooks."

"Then you'll stay a cat," he thought.

"And you'll be lonely and destitute forever without the woman you want either way," she thought, shrugging internally. "Either way, you get your comeuppance. If that means I have to be a cat for a while, I'll live. What about you, though? You're going to be tortured by the memory of her for the rest of your life, knowing that you'll never have her all for yourself."

"Shut up..." Atlas thought. He didn't sever the psychic link, though; she seemed to be making sense.

"Here's what I suggest," she thought. "Go out and get drunk. Drink to forget—that's what I've always heard."

"And we did?" Atlas said to Sappho in the present.

"You did," Sappho said. "But there was a problem."

"What's that?"

"In the psychic world, drinking to forget is a very literal thing," she explained. "I didn't know this at the time, but drinking in large doses can actually do terrible things to your mind. That's why you've been such a mess for so long."

"For fifty years?"

"For fifty years."

Sappho and Atlas suddenly snapped back into reality.

"You decided to go by the name Jack Robinson as you were drinking," Sappho explained. "You'd disappear, get yourself an apartment in the panhandle, and never see Lucretia or Upsilon again. You'd forget about her. The trouble was that you messed up your mind so much that you lost a lot of your short-term memory. It reset itself every time you went to sleep. That's why I've made sure you haven't slept since you woke up last time."

Atlas nodded. "But that still doesn't explain why you trusted me. I'm assuming it was some kind of big cosmic thing—my presence at that meeting of the Waffle House Accords, and my role in using my abilities at that

particular time, caused me to be inexorably bound to some matter of great universal importance? I'm destined to be this bold hero revived to glory after falling from grace?"

Sappho shrugged. "Don't flatter yourself. I trusted you because you were mentally screwed, potent, and handy."

Atlas blinked. "So... because I was malleable."

"Pretty much."

"So you tricked me."

"I tricked you into doing good," Sappho said. "Isn't that worth something?"

Atlas agreed that it was, but he was still a little disappointed. "So that wasn't true about the Xbox 360? How did I get all of that stuff if I've been here for 50 years?"

"Mail order," Sappho said.

"Are you sure it wasn't some subconscious attempt to wake up my heroic identity?"

"Positive."

"But what about—" Something suddenly clicked. "—what about the bassinet? What about the bottlecap? The guy on the Internet? The game? The stuffed cat?"

"I could use a little bit of my power," she explained. "After fifty years, I had refined it enough to start creating actual objects. That's when I started giving you

hints and hoping you'd catch on. As you can see, I had to get a little blatant near the end.

"And the guy on the Internet?"

"That guy was stoned. It was a coincidence."

"A coincidence inexorably tied to my—"

"No, the regular kind."

Atlas had a headache. He decided that it was time to get out, time to try to fight back, if for no other reason than to avoid the tangled mess of improbabilities related to his amnesia. He felt destiny inexorably calling him back north, back to Kentucky.

He took a plane back.

XVI: KEVIN THE NURSING ASSISTANT

Rosie didn't like any of the nursing assistants at Sunset Valley Assisted Living Center, but she disliked Kevin the most. Kevin was very tall, very fat, and very bald—he looked like a tall version of that man she remembered seeing with...

...the demon? Demon? Was it a demon? The boys had said it wasn't a demon. The man at the hospital had said it couldn't have been a demon. He had used some ten-dollar words that Rosie wasn't impressed with, psychobabble this and dementia that and senility the other, to try to convince her she hadn't seen what she had seen. It hadn't done any good. She *had* seen it. She had felt its breath on her. She smelled like the grave. And sometime before she appeared on that lawn again, she had heard Rusty calling for her. Screaming for her. She was sure of it.

But that's why the boys had decided to put her here at Sunset Valley: just to keep an eye on her. They were only looking out for her best interests, after all. They were

such nice boys, such good boys, and they must have known it would be best if she weren't so alone.

But when Kevin was around, she wished she was alone. It wasn't so much that he didn't believe her stories as he did believe them—but only conditionally.

"She was ten feet tall," Rosie had said the day before—her first day in. Kevin had shown up in a nurse's uniform covered in Big Birds and Grovers carrying a tray of something that smelled like food. He hadn't made it—there was none of the cook's passion in his step. "Then she was fifteen feet tall. I swear to you by the time she was done, she must've been a thousand feet tall. Big as a mountain! But nobody believes me."

"Oh, I believe you," Kevin chuckled, placing the tray in front of her. "I seen that episode, too."

Rosie narrowed her eyes. "Episode?"

"Yeah, that was on that cartoon last week. *Lightspeed, Away*. The one where that little girl fights crime. On Cartoon Network. And there was that big demon thing coming at her, getting bigger and all that mess. You seen it too, right?"

"Ummmmmm... no, I haven't," she said. She pulled the cover off of her tray to reveal a thin, watery chili. She

didn't even see any beef in it. "I don't care for television."

And for some reason, Kevin thought that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard, since he began laughing uproariously, to the point that he nearly fell over. Rosie didn't pay attention; she sipped her soup and tried to suppress a gag. It was polite to eat what she was given, though, and she slurped it slowly.

"Oh, you'll learn to like TV!" Kevin concluded. "You'll learn right quick! Oh, ho-ho-ho, you'll learn real damn quick!"

Rosie stumbled with her spoon, dropping it into her bowl. "You mind your tongue now!" she snapped. "That's not proper!"

Kevin, though, just stared blankly, still shaking a bit from laughter. After what seemed like two hours, he stood up and walked to the front of the room. "Whatever, lady. Remote's on the night stand. Push the call button if you need something." And with that, he flipped the TV on to a program about tigers attacking mimes and walked out, leaving Rosie alone with a bowl of thin chili, a television turned up too loudly, and a remote control she didn't know how to use.

"Love thy neighbor," she had sighed.

Rosie really, really disliked Kevin.

She wanted another pillow, but Kevin was on duty. The last time he had turned the TV on, she had managed to figure out how to turn it off again after a few minutes of playing with the remote control, but she didn't want to try it again. Her pillow had gone flat, and normally, she would just throw it in the dryer for a few minutes to fluff and pull it out again. Here, it was call button, wait, wait, get a new pillow, answer a question about urine, have the pillow placed in a bad position, tell the aide not to turn the TV on, watch the aide turn the TV on anyway, wait for the next pillow to go stale. She wasn't even allowed to walk the grounds at this late hour. It was 5 pm.

The boys had left her some thread and cloth for her cross-stitching, and they'd promised to bring more next week, but she had already used what she had. Over and over, all she could stitch was the same thing: that demon. That hideous creature. She stitched it red. When she ran out of red, she stitched it pink. When she ran out of pink, she stitched it blue. It was no wonder the aides tried to get her to watch some TV.

The time between waking up and going to sleep was interminable, and she had only been in the home two days. Rosie had heard that there would be Bingo the next day, but

she hated Bingo in the same way she hated most games of chance. A few days later, there would be country line-dancing. Rosie hated country line-dancing. There was activity after activity after activity, craft after craft after craft, movie night after movie night after movie night. No one spoke.

Rosie sighed and slumped back in her bed, wondering if the demon had been right about Atlas. No, she couldn't have been right. Demons were liars. They were deceivers. If Atlas could help her, he would come soon. He would come to Sunset Valley before the sun set altogether with one goal in mind: to rescue Rosie Roth and to find a way to bring this demon into the holy and just light of God. He'd probably be at the nursing home that very day.

Three days later, Atlas arrived at Sunset Valley Assisted Living Center.

He'd had a rough time getting there, admittedly, and probably could've made it a few days earlier had he not found Rosie's house with a "For Sale" sign on the door and Rosie not in it. He'd been in and out of touch with the real estate agency for days, being put on hold for hours, watching from afar as Upsilon Turquoise, within the mind of Connor, taught him who knows what. He had thought about

coming to the rescue on his own, but Rosie seemed to know something he didn't. If she had managed to exorcise Upsilon completely on her own, then he knew she could help with whatever he was planning.

And so it took him the better part of three days, seven operators, fifteen receptionists, three real estate agents, and the garbage man before Atlas learned where Rosie was.

It was the garbage man who knew, naturally.

So Atlas, clad in his priestly vestments, set off to the nursing home under the guise of a chaplain. It took no great amount of mental manipulation for him to end up in the Memory Care wing of the nursing home.

"Hey, Rosie!" Kevin said from the doorway. Rosie noticed that he had stopped coming in when her ranting about the demon had grown out of hand, and he since kept his distance.

"Come in here if you've got something to say, sonny," Rosie said. "Are my boys here to see me? Poor, confused boys, bless their hearts. Don't even know how to spot a demon in their midst. I'm praying for them, you know."

"Wonderful!" Kevin said, too enthusiastic to be serious. "Perhaps your father would like to pray with you?"

"Oh, my father's long since passed on, bless him!"

Rosie laughed. *Now who's the crazy one?* she thought.

But when Kevin stepped back to allow Father Ryne O'Malley into the room, Rosie remembered herself. She was furious until she looked into those eyes and remembered whose they were.

"Oh... thank you for coming... Father!" she said. "Uh, Kevin, could you please leave us alone?"

"No problem," Kevin said. "You want the TV—"

"Touch the TV and I'll be on the phone with the Department of Health and Human Services in five minutes, and don't you think I won't." She glared.

Kevin didn't turn on the TV.

Atlas walked to Rosie's bed slowly, putting his hand in hers. "You know, you technically bore false testimony against that man," he said.

Rosie smiled. "I think the Lord will forgive me if I ask. He'll do that, you know."

Atlas smiled back. "Rosie, I'm sorry I ran away. If I'd known you and Connor were in such danger, I would have been here sooner."

"You know about the demon then?"

Atlas nodded.

"And you know about the awful things she said about you?"

"I don't know what she said about me," he said, "but there's a good chance that it's all true. I-I guess you could say I was deceived."

Rosie nodded slowly. "Well, I think the Lord can forgive you for that, too, if you're willing to do good with your life."

"I am," he said. "Listen, Rosie, I have a feeling you may be able to help me get rid of her. I think Connor may be possessed by a demon—the man I talked to at the Waffle House."

"You know him?"

"Old college nemesis," he said. "If I'd known he was going after Connor, I would've stopped him there. Now, I need to know what happened when Connor started becoming well-behaved. You said you remembered exactly when it happened. What did you do?"

Rosie thought for a moment. "Well, first of all, Connor had a glass of pink lemonade I'd made for him. He didn't seem to like it. I think the poor boy may be allergic."

"Did you do anything to it?"

"Well, I put some ice in it," she said. "And then I asked the Lord to bless it, same as always."

Atlas nodded—he had a feeling he understood. "And then what?"

"Then he went off into the kitchen for a while, and I started playing a song on the piano."

"What song?"

"Oh, a song my dear Rusty used to like!" she said wistfully. "It's by Mr. Perry Como, and it's called 'Catch a Falling Star.' It's such a nice, sweet song. Why, Rusty would sing that song with me every time I'd play it—it was our first dance, you see! And Connor, why, he just joined in and started singing, just the same as Rusty did! And after that, he was very good for the rest of the night! Just goes to show you that music soothes the savage beast, and even the savage boy." Rosie looked up to find Atlas staring at the ceiling, frowning, his eyes distant in thought. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

Atlas wasn't okay. He had noticed a picture of Rusty in Rosie's house the night after they had gone to Waffle House, and he'd noticed the flecks of orange all over his body. Something in his subconscious had triggered upon seeing it, but he couldn't place it. He knew now what it meant. He knew now that Rosie had indeed thrown the souls

under Upsilon Turquoise's control into disarray—and one soul in particular.

"Rosie, we need to get back to your house if we're going to save Connor," he said. "We need to do what you did all over again."

"I see," Rosie said slowly.

"And we may have to do a little lying to get out of here."

"I think the Lord will forgive us."

XVII: RUSTY ROTH

Atlas dismissed his own expectations that the Ensor house would somehow transform itself into a huge and imposing castle with the revelation of Lucretia's true intention. He had discovered that unspeakable good and evil can be even more prevalent in the familiar—or, in this case, in the asshole's house. There was no moment of glorious moral revelation, no cathartic release—just a profound sense of duty. They could save Connor. They had to. Atlas shuddered to think of the inconveniences a potentially omnipotent person could be tricked into unleashing. Lucretia had invented both lawyers and shows glorifying them, which was an act of evil that made his skin twist. Upsilon, though, could potentially have Connor build *shrines* glorifying lawyers, or establish entire nations full of nothing but lawyers. He shuddered.

The good news they found when they arrived was that they wouldn't need to look for Connor, since he was already on the front lawn, holding a squirrel in his hands. Clark was on the front porch, sitting on a porch swing, watching

as Connor threw the squirrel up in the air. The boy squinted, and the squirrel hovered for a few seconds before falling back to the ground. His training, apparently, had begun.

"Do you see the demon?" Rosie asked as they approached. Atlas looked through all of the windows, then all across the yard. He scanned the vicinity for minds and was relieved to find only the vast potential of Connor's and the vast wasteland of Clark's.

"She's not here," Atlas said. "That's two lucky things."

And Rosie, for the first time in weeks, laughed. "That's not luck, Atlas. That's Jesus. That's the will of God."

Atlas turned to Rosie to find her smiling, still sunny as a summer morning even after all she had been through. He sighed—he no longer felt good about his phony conversion.

"Rosie..." he began. "I don't—"

"Shush," she said, putting a finger to his lips. "I don't want to hear it right now. You get Connor into the house. I'll have everything set up when you get there."

And as Rosie ran toward the house, she found another fortunate thing working in her favor: the boys hadn't sold the house yet, and they had left the front door unlocked.

Atlas waited for her to disappear into the house before he made his move toward Connor.

"Okay, Atlas," he said, breathing slowly. "Military precision. Military precision. Military pre—"

Unfortunately, his heel was stuck in an abandoned snake hole, and he fell flat on his face—not with military precision, but with Department of Education precision.

When he was up on his knees, Connor was already upon him, staring him in the eyes. They were not, as he expected, Connor's eyes, but the eyes of the balding fat man he had met outside of Waffle House. They were the eyes of Upsilon Turquoise.

"Hey, Big A," Connor said in that sneering, nasally voice. "Glad to see you're—"

But before he could get out another word, Atlas had leapt to his feet and captured him in his arms. The boy struggled and kicked, but if there was one thing Atlas remembered, it was that Upsilon could never, ever teach Connor to be graceful.

"Hey, hold it right there!" Clark shouted, and he was on his feet and giving chase across the yard, stumbling as he ran in his morning slippers. "You're that priest! I knew you were that kind of priest!"

Atlas thought back to the plan again, a technique he had learned centuries ago called the Minutia Blast. By focusing on a specific series of pointless memories—the married status of third cousins, recent eliminations on a popular reality show, stories about bad fast food experiences, and so on—he could overload the mind of a victim with useless trivia to the point that it would actually fall into a stupor. The stupefaction could last for as long as an hour as the victim tried to hack his or her way through the tangled webs of worthless drabble and back to the more organized worthless drabble of everyday life. It would buy them enough time to get Upsilon out of Connor, he had reasoned.

But instead, as Clark approached, Atlas just punched him in the jaw with his one free hand, and Clark was laid out just the same.

"That's for not putting pants on before you open the door!" he shouted as he stumbled across the lawn, Connor under his arm, toward Rosie's house.

He had little time to look around when they went inside—at any moment, Upsilon could decide to temporarily cease his possession and render the plan pointless. So he dropped Connor on the floor in the center of the room and turned to Rosie, who was holding a glass of pink lemonade.

"Oh, praise the Lord!" she shouted. "There was still some lemona—"

"Piano!" Atlas screamed, pouring the lemonade down Connor's throat. Just like the first time it had happened, Connor screamed and writhed, his mouth practically frothing with pain. Then, before he could continue, Atlas drew a coin from his pocket and thrust it to Connor's forehead. There was a sudden rush, a sense of speed, and before long, Atlas found himself on a linoleum floor, surrounded by faceless pale things furiously working away at typewriters.

To say the least, Connor's Psi-Room was in much better shape than Atlas's—and much, much roomier. Instead of piles of papers and damaged memories, there were file cabinets perpetually being stocked, sorted, and reviewed. Instead of skeleton-like workers, there were featureless beige people who moved with the same military precision that Atlas had found himself lacking. And instead of the reassuring face of Sappho, there was Upsilon Turquoise, looking taller, more muscular, and more handsome than he had any right to look in the outside world. In the mental realm he was a warlord, covered in a bronze armor that mimicked the Greek style but was flecked with turquoise from the helm to the boots. And surrounding him, ready to join the battle, were about a dozen of the featureless people—these more muscular

than the others. And behind them all, the mental representation of Connor sat bound and gagged, leaning against a filing cabinet full of his own memories.

"You look great, Upsy," Atlas said. "You colossal piece of shit."

"Cute," Upsilon said. "And I mean that literally. Cute. You must've spent your little time away trying to come up with some sort of intimidating thing to say to me once you got in here, and that was the best thing you could come up with. Feeble. Absolutely feeble. That's the mind of Atlas, the moron who had to be talked into believing that the sky didn't need to be held up. I'm disappointed in you, Atlas. I thought after hanging around with me for so many years, a little bit of my cleverness would rub off on you. No such luck, I gue—"

And it was at that moment that the entire Psi-Room echoed with a syncopated piano beat. Middle C. G. G. Low G. C. Repeated again. That staccato rhythm.

And as Rosie picked up the beat, added the harmony, and began singing, something began to happen to one of Upsilon's henchmen. All at once, the faceless, featureless exterior began to peel away. A second later, it began to tear it away itself. What emerged from the shell was an elderly man in a flannel shirt and blue jeans, his red hair

curling under his baseball cap. His skin, splotchy and ancient, was marked with orange.

He turned back to Atlas and grinned. "You know my wife, don'cha?"

Atlas smiled. "She's a good lady."

And with that, the goons began, one by one, to follow Rusty Roth's lead. They tore off their shells, revealing not faceless entities but people—men, women, young, old, some dressed in more modern clothing, one dressed like a German doctor hundreds of years ago, another with a toga draped over her. Souls. Dozens of souls of the deceased and the deceived, tricked by Lucretia, Upsilon Turquoise, and even (though they didn't know it) Atlas himself into an eternity of postmortem servitude. The song had reminded one of them of his humanity, and at the sight of him, the others were reminded of theirs.

They turned back to Upsilon Turquoise and sneered, and the commander—so bold, so handsome, so glittery in his armor—began to backpedal.

"Slaves!" he hissed, falling backward onto his ass. "Yours is a life of everlasting servitude, and don't you forget it! I order you to destroy the intruder! I order you to tear Rusty Roth and Atlas apart!"

"Sorry, we don't know who that is," a man in a tuxedo growled.

"You never told us anybody else's name," the woman in the toga added in perfect, unaccented English. She must have died at a party.

"The one in the hat!" Upsilon shrieked! "The one in the plaid shirt! He's-ow!" An old man dressed as a Viking kicked him in the face. "He's the enem-oof!" A woman in a red flapper dress did the same. "YOU IDIOTS! DO AS I SAY!"

Atlas and Rusty pushed their way to the front of the group, standing over Upsilon Turquoise. His armor had disappeared, and his hair had fallen to the ground. Laying before them was the chubby, sniveling coward of the physical realm who never knew when to shut his mouth.

"Get out," Atlas said. "Get out and get to the Waffle House. And bring Lucretia. Tell her Rosie, Connor, and I will be there shortly. We need to talk."

Upsilon started to shrink away again, but all at once, his fear subsided. He stood and brushed his shirt off, even though there wasn't a speck of dust on it. He looked at Atlas, bowed, and disappeared.

"Hey, Waffle House, huh?" Rusty said. "That sounds pretty dern good right about now! I ain't had nothing to eat in a dog's age!"

Atlas turned to Rusty and smirked. "You didn't let your wife hear you talk like that, did you?"

"Son, I'm dead," Rusty said. "My obligation to Earthly grammar done died with me."

The other souls, meanwhile, had untied Connor and pushed him toward Atlas. The boy—or at least the mental manifestation of him—looked up at his savior and smiled. Then, he hugged Atlas's legs as tight as he could.

"Thanks," he said.

"They didn't teach you to do anything too evil, did they?" Atlas asked.

"Are you kidding?" Connor said with a chuckle. "The idiot kept putting it off. Said he'd teach me to rule the world next week. All I can do now is stop animals from falling."

"Well, you never know when that'll come in handy," Atlas said, rubbing Connor's hair. He turned back to Rusty one more time, and the old man was starting to become transparent, to blink out every once in a while. "So, is there anything you want me to tell Rosie?"

"Nah," he said. "Best not to worry her. She don't know about Lucretia, does she?"

"She heard it but she didn't believe it," Atlas said.

"Well then, I reckon she ought to just worry about her own life then. No use dwelling on the mistakes of a stupid old corpse like me. If it's like last time, the kid's out there singing his heart out, and I'm off to get sucked into doing another job I don't want to do. Probably till the end of time."

"And you're fine with that?" Atlas asked.

"Don't have a choice," Rusty said, scratching his head. He had nearly completely vanished—the last element of Upsilon's possession left in Connor's mind. "But I gotta bear my own chains. Don't make Rosie bear 'em for me."

And with that, he was gone completely, swept away from Rosie Roth's house and toward a nearby Waffle House where Atlas knew he was already waiting with Lucretia. His work done, Atlas closed his eyes and opened them up again in the physical world, where he was sitting on the floor, an exhausted—but free—Connor Ensor leaning against him. The two of them breathed slowly, and Rosie offered them both fresh cups of lemonade. They drank gladly.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Demon's gone," Connor said. "But we need to go."

"Go? Where?" Rosie asked.

"Waffle House," Atlas grunted, pulling himself to his feet. He was drained of energy and in no mood for what he

was about to face. "It's time to outlawyer the ones who invented lawyers."

XVIII: JESUS

There was trepidation in Atlas's steps as he left Rosie's car in the parking lot of the Bailey, Kentucky Waffle House. Connor and Rosie were behind him literally and figuratively, but he still felt alone. He was about to be forced to negotiate his way through supernatural codes and statutes that he remembered little to nothing about, and he was doing so with an elderly Christian lady and a ten-year-old boy as his tactical support, and to top it all off, he somehow knew that tradition required him to eat, and he had terrible heartburn.

It was the sort of thing he was sure he was able to will away at some point in his existence, before he'd had the audacity to wipe out his own memory and leave himself lying on the floor of that bar next to someone who wasn't his cat the day before but was his cat at that moment. In those times, when his mind was so strong that he could probably decide that the sky did need holding up after all, he had no idea what his potential was. And now? Now the

back of his throat burned. The mighty hadn't so much fallen as they had become quadriplegic.

Lucretia was already waiting for them when they walked inside the building. She was at a booth near the counter in a deep maroon blazer and pants, her hair tied up in a bun and held together by two pins. Next to her, in a gray business suit and black tie, was Upsilon Turquoise, who was shuffling through papers in a briefcase. Behind them, at the counter, Alice Stond stood with a look of vexation on her face.

"Y'all wanna explain this?" she snapped as Atlas walked to the booth.

"Yeah, there were problems," he answered. Upsilon offered him a handshake, but Atlas was in no mood to take him up on it. "Kid's dad apparently loves nookie more than the safety and sanctity of all creatures on Earth."

"And where were you when this was going on?"

"Florida," a woman's voice said from the bar. Two seats away from the booth, Atlas suddenly realized, Sappho was seated, hunched over what looked like parchment. She was wearing a white toga and not getting so much as a glance from the thick-bodied trucker two stools down. Such was the nature of Waffle House. "Idiot thought he'd saved

the day. And now I've got to be here recording the beginning of the end of the world. Thanks a lot."

Atlas blinked. He croaked out a noise. He was suddenly overcome with the stares: Lucretia with that cool, confident smile; Upsilon with that grimace; Alice so frustrated that her eyes seemed to be crossing; Sappho, not exactly staring, but giving the party such a cold shoulder that a stare would have been more reassuring.

At once, Atlas felt a warm hand on his elbow and turned to see Rosie, not staring but looking. She nodded up at him and produced a Bible from her huge purse that Atlas hadn't seen before: a thick, hard-covered one. Atlas's first impulse was to grab it, crack everyone in the face, and run like hell to Aruba or Mars or somewhere where all of them could live safely, but years of fighting these first impulses kept him under control, but inexplicably filled with a desire to go play video games for a few millennia.

"Well now!" Rosie said as cheerfully as she could. "I suppose we'd better get this messy business out of the way." She stood back and motioned toward the booth at Atlas while Lucretia looked her over, eyeing her soul like a piece of ethereal meat.

"I assume you have taught the mortal the nature of these proceedings," she said. "I would hate to see a stupid old woman spoil things for you by stepping out of line."

"Oh, you *know* I did," Atlas said. He had tried to sound ice-cold but his voice had squeaked midway through the sentence. He slid into the booth across from Lucretia and motioned for Rosie to join him at the table.

"Oh, could we get an extra chair at this table?" Rosie asked. "Connor needs a place to sit."

Alice sighed. Upsilon and Lucretia looked at each other and nodded; this one seemed in the bag.

"Ooooh, we can't do that, hon," Alice said. "Rules of the game. Y'all can't have more than five people at the table. Didn't Atlas tell you that?"

And all of a sudden Atlas felt like sinking under the table. He hadn't told her that.

"Strike one," Upsilon muttered. Connor, meanwhile, had already climbed onto the nearby bar stool between Sappho and the booth and was looking over the menu. Rosie shot Atlas an icy glare as she sat at the booth. She had come to the conclusion that Atlas knew as much about what was supposed to be happening as she did, and she wasn't happy about it.

"Well then, now that you have sorted out your procedural issues, let us now call this summit to order."

"Yes, le—" Atlas began.

"Hash browns, scattered, smothered, topped, peppered, capped," Lucretia interrupted. "And a glass of milk."

"Hash browns, scattered, smothered, peppered, and water," Upsilon added. There was something terribly procedural about their tones that made Atlas want to scream, but before he could, he found all eyes turned to him. He felt tremendous gravity pressing down on him as he looked over the menu.

"Hash browns, *not* scattered, covered, chunked, and a Coke." He looked up at Alice for reassurance and found her nodding. She shot him a small wink, and Atlas all at once knew that he'd succeeded. He sighed.

"I'll just have a slice of pie, sweetie," Rosie chirped.

It was as if the ceiling had collapsed, and Upsilon started to snicker.

"Perhaps your fool would like to order that which is appropriate for her role in these proceedings?" Lucretia hissed. Atlas tugged at his collar, then looked down at the menu. Alice looked offended. And Rosie was now glaring wooden spoons at Lucretia.

"Don't you be calling me a fool now!" she shouted.

"Now I don't care if you're some kind of hellspawn or witch-lady or whatever foul beast you seem to think you are! You treat people with respect! Maybe *then* we can get you right with the—"

"Atlas, tell your witness to stop addressing those to whom she may not speak," Lucretia said, "else I will have to ask you to eject her from these proceedings."

"You won't eject me from—"

"Hash browns!" Atlas shouted suddenly, throwing his hand over Rosie's mouth. "Hash browns, *not* scattered, covered, chunked, topped, capped! And a—a pink lemonade!" He stared into Rosie's eyes and whispered into her mind. *Not now*, he said. *Just listen*. Rosie scowled her consent, and Atlas lowered his hand.

"Now that the orders have been placed, we may begin," Lucretia continued. "Our case is simple. The father and legal guardian of Connor Logan Ensor is one Clark Mabel Ensor of 533 Cramwood Street in Bailey, Kentucky. The mother of Mr. Ensor, Teresa Mae Ensor, passed away on July 18, 2002. As Connor Logan Ensor has not yet reached the age of fifteen, the age of supernatural consent, Mr. Ensor is therefore well within his rights to claim responsibility for the status of Connor Logan Ensor's legal possessions,

as per Supernatural Code 852.819-Aleph-Omicron-B." Upsilon produced a few papers from his briefcase and passed them to Lucretia, who gave them a once over before sliding them toward Atlas.

Atlas looked over the papers, found the type too small, and decided to bluff.

"I'm *familiar* with Supernatural Code," he said. His voice cracked again. "But I'm also familiar with the fact that the agent working on your behalf, Upsilon Turquoise, was unable to retain control of the boy's soul and relinquished it not twenty minutes ago. The boy's mind and soul are, naturally, property of whomever has control of his soul last."

Lucretia scratched her chin, while Upsilon returned to the briefcase. "Interesting," Lucretia said. "Would you mind citing precedent? Or if no precedent exists, would you please direct us to the section of the Supernatural Code to which you are referring?"

A chill crept over Atlas's back. He had stumbled his way into several successes so far, as the latent memories deep within his mind had crept back to the surface when he needed them. He was sure, then, that so long as Rosie didn't chime in, he could find the law. "Supernatural Code 18.7582-Aleph-Omega-J. Upsilon Turquoise could not continue

to possess the boy. I could. Possession, as you know, is nine-tenths of the law." He folded his arms across his chest and smirked. Rosie patted him on the elbow again. And as if further reassurance of his victory was necessary, Alice had returned and handed out the drinks.

And yet Atlas could somehow hear Sappho rolling her eyes, which is an odd thing for someone to be able to hear.

Without a word, Upsilon produced another paper from his briefcase and handed it to Lucretia. She looked it over and slid it back to Atlas. He looked down at it.

It was Supernatural Code 18.7582-Aleph-Omega-J.

It read, in large letters, "LOKI IS AWESOME."

"Atlas, was there any reason why you directed these proceedings toward a joke code enacted during the Nordic Era under the noses of the entire supernatural world?" she said.

Atlas gulped.

"And was there furthermore any reason why you suggested this particular code, which has been a tremendous inconvenience for all supernatural mankind, as it now requires us to uphold the awesomeness of Loki whenever questions of awe and reverence come to light?"

Atlas gulped again.

"And was there furthermore any reason why you suggested this particular code when you know full well that a group of supernatural beings in Maine are currently engaged in a two-year-long debate with Loki in which he is attempting to prove that his awesomeness affords him the opportunity to kidnap and devour small children?"

Atlas tried to gulp, but the gulp was cut off at the pass by a previous gulp. He choked. He took a long sip from his Coke.

"Atlas," Lucretia said. "Is there any reason why you directed these proceedings toward this frivolous, inconvenient, and generally very tasteless code?"

"Well—"

"And please bear in mind that distracting these proceedings with trivialities is grounds to have your entire case thrown out, at which time the soul of Connor Logan Ensor will become my property in perpetuity throughout space and time."

Connor looked back at Lucretia, having heard his name, but thought better of it when his chocolate milk showed up. He began blowing bubbles in it, which he hadn't done for years but was a fine way to distract himself from the immensity of Atlas's failure.

And so Atlas sat for a moment and thought. With Lucretia no longer talking, he at least had the luxury of a little silence, but something about the way Upsilon was staring at him made him hear someone blowing raspberries at his mind. He tried to shut it all out, tried to think, and instead opted to just wing it. Surely there was some reason he'd dragged up this particular code.

"As—" he began. "As—as a means to a metaphor."

Lucretia glared at him flatly. "A metaphor."

"A metaphor," he repeated. "You see, Loki is widely regarded as a trickster, and to the Nordic people, he was even a god of tricks. He is, in that way, not unlike you, Lucretia: deceitful and full of lies!" He stood up and pointed an accusing finger at her. Two tables over, a man nursing a cup of coffee looked over at the group, decided he wanted nothing to do with them, and turned back.

The table was quiet. Then, at last, Connor said, "That's not a metaphor."

Atlas turned sharply towards him. "What?"

"You said 'like.' That means it's a simile, not a metaphor."

"That's not the point!" Atlas shouted. He dropped down to the seat once again. "You, Lucretia, are a cold, bureaucratic, heartless woman steeped in legalese and

obsessed with codifying every aspect of our once rich and mystifying existence! You are calculating and mathematical, when someone in your position—that is, a succubus—should be spontaneous and willing to break all manner of natural law! You are, in other words, unauthorized to deal in the economics of the soul, since you are not a succubus! You are completely and utterly unfuckable!”

Atlas had planned at this point to lean back in his chair, pick up his Coke, and take a long, triumphant sip. Instead, he was nearly knocked into Rosie when Alice, who had stepped away from the grill for a moment, slapped him on the arm hard.

“Watch your mouth!” she snapped.

Atlas steadied himself before Rosie slapped him on the other arm with her Bible.

“Yes, there are ladies and children present!” she added.

So instead, Atlas rubbed his left arm with his right hand. Then he rubbed his right arm with his left hand. It was hard to tell which hurt worse: the slap from the Amazon warrior woman who was now returning to her grill or the slap from the old church lady who had opened her Bible and begun to pray.

"Cute," Lucretia said, her voice dripping with so much sarcasm that Atlas started to reach for a napkin. "Foolish, but cute. Upsy."

Upsilon Turquoise had opened the briefcase and was fiddling around in it before he produced a card, handing it to her. She held it up, and it featured a picture of her standing in front of a plain gray background, her eyes closed, surrounded by tiny pieces of writing.

"What's that?" Atlas asked.

"My succubus license."

"And what's all of that around it?"

"The necessary vital information."

"And why are your eyes closed?"

"Because the idiot could not figure out how to work Daedalus's camera."

Atlas thought about this. None of it made sense, and he said as much.

"It makes perfect sense," Lucretia replied. Upsilon, who was still busy, handed her a copy of a book, which she opened and perused. Atlas could see the word *Kama* on the front and knew the word *Sutra* was under her hand. "Because no matter how much mystery and wonder seems to surround sex, no matter how much spontaneity seems to be involved, in the end, the mortals want it codified. They want rules."

They want diagrams." Upsilon handed Lucretia something else: a magazine. She laid *Kama Sutra* on the table and began looking at the magazine. Atlas saw the words "50 Steamy Sex Secrets!" written under a flattering picture of Oprah Winfrey. "That is why the legal system has become so entrenched in sexuality: because it has rooted itself there. That is why these stupid magazines fly off the shelves. That is why there are marriage licenses, divorce papers, citations written to eighteen-year-old boys who have sex with seventeen-year-old girls."

She handed the magazine and the *Kama Sutra* back to Upsilon, who returned them to the briefcase.

"Mortals do not like the idea that sexuality is beyond their control. So they codify it. That is my domain."

She narrowed her eyes.

"And anyway, if I am so unfuckable, why did you fuck me?"

Atlas wanted to respond but didn't, so he sat on his hands. Rosie didn't know who to be shocked at first, so she slapped Atlas in the arm with the Bible again. She turned to speak to Lucretia but found herself silenced by the power of her presence, just as she had been in the basement.

"Now that I have demonstrated this to you—with a complete lack of provocation, might I add—I believe we can

continue." Upsilon handed Lucretia yet another sheet of paper, which she held up. This time, the text was more than legible: it was a contract. Atlas glanced over it and found, to his shock, that Clark Ensor's middle name really was Mabel. "In this contract, signed by the parties of Clark Mabel Ensor and Lucretia, under the auspices of Upsilon Turquoise, Connor Logan Ensor's soul is pledged to the service of Lucretia and all parties in her employ for a period not to exceed eternity. In return, Clark Mabel Ensor is promised the sexual services of Lucretia until that time at which Mr. Ensor may have in his possession all properties, land and maritime, on the planet earth, at which point Lucretia will be freed from her obligations to Mr. Ensor."

"You'll just stab him in the back," Atlas cringed.

"I will be within my rights to do so," she said. "Now, do you need to peruse this contract any further? Do I need to reiterate Clark Mabel Ensor's rights toward Connor Logan Ensor's soul? Do you have... well, do you have *anything* to say in your defense?"

As he read the contract, Atlas felt sweat cover his face—not a trickling sweat, but the kind that appears on a too-humid day in August just after a shower. He didn't need to read every word; Lucretia had eons of practice and would

not have settled for a contract that was anything except flawless. The wording was so air-tight that she could have made a space shuttle out of it.

Alice delivered the food, but Atlas didn't feel hungry.

Neither did Rosie. She thanked Alice as she took her plate but regarded the chili on top with disdain. It smelled good, but years of Sizzlin' Larry's Six-Alarm Chili had spoiled her. Instead of eating, she took a careful drink of her tea, then turned to Lucretia.

"May I please say something now?" she asked.

Lucretia turned to her and smirked. "Atlas, will you allow your witness to speak?"

Atlas was too busy playing with his hash browns to care. He wanted them scattered, but tradition required him to order the opposite of what his opponent, Lucretia, had ordered. He thought it was a silly tradition and was sure he'd said as such when the Waffle House Accords were drawn up, but he could do nothing about it now. "Go ahead," he sighed.

Rosie collected herself, brushing a bit of hair away from her eyes. She laid the Bible on the table in front of her and began flipping through it, trying to find a particular passage. This went on for a few minutes before

she laid her hands on the Bible and locked eyes with Lucretia.

"I can't remember what I was looking for," she said, "but I just want to say that I think what you're doing to poor Connor is wrong!"

Upsilon snorted with laughter.

"He is a good boy!" she shouted. She slapped the Bible against Upsilon's wrist, and he recoiled, grimacing. "He's a nice, smart boy, and he doesn't need to be falling in with the likes of you! Treating a little boy like he's something to be bought or sold... well, I got news for you, Miss Lucretia: you aren't entitled to this boy's soul! He is bought and paid for by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ!"

And Atlas snapped. With one hand, he snatched the Bible out of Rosie's hand, and threw it back behind him, where it landed mere inches from a nearby college student's plate of waffles. He stood up, glaring at Rosie.

"You know, I've had just about all I can stand of you and that stupid Bible!" he shouted. "I'm in here trying to fight for this kid's life, and you're turning all fundamentalist on me! Jesus, why the hell did I even bring you along?"

Rosie stiffened her lip. "You watch your—"

"I'm not watching my damn tongue, Rosie!"

"Mrs. Ro—"

"Rosie! Rosie! Rosie! Rosie! *Rosie!*" he screamed. "The Bible is just a book of silly stories and myths! Not one word of it is true, okay? And frankly, hearing you talk about the damn thing constantly has made this, without a doubt, *the* most trying period of my entire life! And I held up the sky! With my own two arms!"

"Actually—" Upsilon began, but a flick of Atlas's head told him where to shove whatever he was about to say.

"You are a pain in my ass, Rosie Roth," Atlas concluded. "You know what? I'll let you do it. Right now. Prove to me that your stupid Bible is real. Go ahead. I'm listening. And you can use anything you want. Hell..." He dropped back in his seat and motioned behind the counter, where Alice had approached. She was clenching the table, probably to keep herself from punching Atlas in the face. "Hell, ask her. Go ask Alice. She's already ten feet tall. Hey, Alice, is the Bible true?"

"Yes," she hissed.

Atlas threw his arms in the air. "There? See? Realize it now? Listen to her! She's—wait, what?"

Atlas turned back and stared up at Alice. He rubbed his ears, swearing he had something crazy in one of them.

Finally, he looked around. Everyone in the restaurant was staring at him.

"Y'all need to grow up," Alice said. "You wanna win this boy's soul back or not?"

Atlas stammered, motioning back to Rosie. "But—but—she's just a stupid—"

"Don't you say that word about her again," Alice snapped. "You wanna be the hero? The most heroic thing you can do right now is to shut up and let Mrs. Roth talk!"

"Call me Rosie, dear," Rosie said.

"Let Rosie talk," Alice said. "Do that and Connor's gonna be fine." And with that, she turned, trying to explain to her supervisor why the crazy man shouldn't be kicked out and why the police shouldn't be called.

"Atlas, are you going to let your witness speak or not?" Lucretia repeated. "After all, she is just a mortal. Surely you should be able to summarize her argument."

Atlas turned to Rosie, who was breathing deeply, trying to calm herself down, muttering "Love thy neighbor... love thy neighbor... love thy neighbor..." So far, he had managed to weasel his way out of nothing. He decided at that moment that if Rosie failed now, it would at least relieve him of some responsibility. So he stuffed his mouth full of hash browns, nodded, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Thank you," she cringed, then turned to Lucretia.

"Now then, vile temptress, you evil whore of Babylon..."

"Fire Island, actually," Lucretia corrected her.

"You have no right to Connor's soul, and neither does his father," Rosie said. "His soul already belongs to Jesus."

"I am afraid that is not the case," Lucretia said.

"The boy has been in our possession for several days, and any attempt on his part to save his soul would have been rendered moot, as it was already pledged to us. I know you have been bringing him to church, but it makes no difference. The bargain was signed on June 19, 2006—"

"The day after Connor was in church getting saved."

Lucretia blinked. "Excuse me?"

"We went to church that day!" Rosie said with a laugh.

"Connor, Mr. Robinson, my boys, and I were there, I mean. And Connor, bless his heart, went up to the front of that church and gave his life to the Lord!"

"You can't be serious," Lucretia stammered. It was the first time Atlas had heard her use a contraction. "You—you don't have any—"

But before Lucretia could finish, Connor tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned, Connor flipped a folded piece of paper to her, the perforated edges of old printer

paper still along the side. She unfolded the paper and revealed it to Upsilon, and Atlas could just make out the other side: a picture of Jesus on the cross, some writing, and two signatures. One of the signatures was Connor's; the other was that of the pastor of Bailey Church of God.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Is that legally binding?"

"It-it *is*," Lucretia stuttered, bound by the Waffle House Accords to the truth.

"It's from a dot matrix printer!" Atlas shouted. "They haven't made a printer like that in ten years!"

"And it's signed," Upsilon added. His face ran the gamut of emotions, beginning with mystification and ending with stupefaction, making stops off at frustration and fury along the way.

"There, see?" Rosie said. "He doesn't need his daddy handling his soul for him; he's proven he's responsible enough to deal with it himself!"

"She's right," Upsilon said.

"Damn," Lucretia added.

Atlas's head was spinning—first figuratively, then literally, then figuratively once again. He tried to collect himself, since he thought he should say something.

"Guh," he began.

"Buh?" he tried again.

"So... yeah, there you go," he concluded. "Connor's soul is the property of—of Jesus Christ, apparently. He's—immortal? Still alive, I take it?"

"He lives in a pocket of extradimensional space on an uncharted island in the Atlantic Ocean," Upsilon said. "He's preparing a place for his believers."

"A really, really nice place," Lucretia added. "Swimming pool and everything." Then, all at once, she shook her head. "Wait a minute, what am I saying? Okay, fine, you win. But this isn't over, Atlas. The second you or Rosie let your guard down, I'm coming back for that kid. I'm going to make him a new offer."

"Yeah!" Upsilon added.

"He'll turn on Jesus the second he realizes that he can call the shots on his own without some two-bit magician from Judea breathing down his neck. He'll join up with us then?"

And then Atlas, remembering something he had heard about the Waffle House Accords, crossed his arms. "But that's not going to stop you from going after him behind our backs, I take it?"

"Oh, of course not!" Lucretia said—then, realizing what she had said, covered her mouth. Sappho motioned to

Alice, whispered something into her ear, then patted her on the shoulder as she approached Lucretia.

"So," Alice said. "Conspiracy to violate a soul bargain. And we know y'all ain't lying."

"But—" Lucretia began, but was cut off when Alice pulled her to her feet. The Amazon dwarfed the succubus, who was no small woman herself.

"Y'all realize the penalty for a conspiracy like that is imprisonment until the kid's definitely safe, right?" she said. "We got a nice extradimensional pocket in the back where y'all can rest a spell." She looked over Lucretia's head toward Upsilon, who was backing away. "You in on it too, big guy?"

Upsilon looked up at Alice in terror, realizing that saying nothing would mean not incriminating himself. He then turned to Atlas via some telepathic urge and heard a whisper in his mind.

You know, Atlas thought to him, those pockets are pretty crowded, and even succubi have needs. Besides, it's not like they're going to have a cell for you right away.

Upsilon turned back to Alice, looked over Lucretia's curvaceous body, and grinned. "Yeah, you got me. Guilty as charged."

"Y-You won't get away with this!" Lucretia screamed as Alice grabbed her and Upsilon by the arms. "I'll fight this! I'll take you all to the very courts you devised! And I'll-I'll—" The laws pertaining to speaking the truth suddenly kicked in. "—I'll probably be convicted anyway!"

Alice dragged both over the counter and to the back, getting a dirty look from her manager before she disappeared behind the back doors. Her manager stormed after her. A few customers who had witnessed the whole thing looked for a minute, concluded that this was just the sort of thing that happened at Waffle House all the time, and went back to their food.

Atlas looked at Rosie, who still looked angry. He turned to Connor, who looked relieved. He turned to Sappho, who looked like she would at any moment bite his head clean off—and not figuratively, either.

"Now," she said. "I hope you've learned something."

"That..." Atlas began, but choked on his tongue. He coughed. "That was the most improbable series of things I've ever seen."

"It was all happening, though, if you would've just opened your eyes and paid attention," Sappho said. "And if you would've actually, you know, *listened* to that crazy old

lady you've been hanging around with. She's much smarter than you think, and age does bring wisdom."

"But I'm older than her by at least a few millennia."

"Then it'd be really nice if you started acting it."

Atlas turned to Rosie, who was counting out the money for the meal she had barely eaten. "Rosie, I'm sorry about all that," he said.

"You ought to be," Rosie muttered. "Making a scene like that. You ought to know better."

"You're right," he said. "And I know that you're under no obligation to forgive me, but I hope you will. You saved that kid's life when I couldn't. That's pretty amazing."

A thousand voices screamed out in Rosie's mind. This was the same man who had lied to her about being a priest, who had tackled Connor and knocked her over, who had abandoned her and left her and Connor in the waiting arms of the two demons, and then who had the audacity to lash out at her—even in spite of the fact that she had known the solution.

Something told her to gloat. Jesus, far away in the middle of the Atlantic, whispered to her that it wasn't a good idea.

"I'm sure the Lord will forgive you," she said with a smile.

XIX: JAMES EARL JONES

Everyone was mostly quiet as Rosie drove Connor and Atlas back to Cramwood Street. Atlas watched the asshole's house as they pulled up, watched him as he rocked on the front porch, drinking a cold beer, offering a wave as Rosie drove past. Atlas sneered.

"I'll take Connor home," he said. "He needs to know about his wife, and I want to be the one to tell him."

"Can you be nicer about it than you were at the Waffle House?" Rosie asked without turning around.

Atlas turned this over in his head for a moment. His initial plan had been to punch Clark in the face one more time—it had felt so good the first time, and he had been in such a rush. He wanted to savor it.

But he also owed one to Rosie.

"I'll be nice," he said.

"Okay then," Rosie said, as she pulled the car in her driveway. "Atlas, if you need a place to stay tonight, you can—"

"I'm going back to my apartment," he said. "Mrs. Roth..."

"Rosie, dear."

Atlas smiled. "Rosie. I can't thank you enough for everything you've done. You're an extraordinary woman. Rusty was very lucky."

Rosie giggled. Through the rear view mirror, Atlas could see that she was blushing. "Oh, don't go giving me a big head now, dear. I did what the Lord wanted to do. It wasn't me; it was Him." At last she turned back. "I wish you didn't disagree with it, Atlas, but I wish you'd give Him a chance. I know there are some bad apples that profess to give their lives to Christ, but they're nothing but false prophets, the whole bunch of them! They don't represent what the Lord and His kingdom are all about."

"I know," Atlas said. "And if that's the God up there, I'm thanking him right now that I found you."

"May He bless you and keep you, Atlas," Rosie said as Atlas stepped out of the car.

"You, too," Atlas said. "And keep an eye on him." He reached back in and patted Connor on the shoulder, then closed the car door behind him. Connor joined him outside the car, and the two walked back together. "She's a smart woman, kid. I know you've got this big destiny in store for

you, but you could do a lot worse than listening to her right now."

"I know," Connor said. That was all he said.

Clark stood up as the two approached, his eyebrows low, a scowl across his face. "Connor, have you seen Felicity?"

"She left," Atlas said quickly. "I don't think she's coming back."

Clark gasped. He stuttered. He stammered. He was nervous for the first time since Atlas had met him. "B-But she—"

"They got me out of that contract, Dad," Connor said flatly. "Making deals with my soul like that isn't a good thing to do, you know."

Clark stuttered again. He stammered. He scratched the back of his head. Somewhere along the line, he dropped his beer, and it began oozing out of the can. "Connor, I—I'm sorry. It was—"

"I'm sure the Lord can forgive you," Connor said. He turned back to Atlas and winked before embracing his father's legs. Clark hesitated, looking Atlas over from head to toe. He felt something whisper in the back of his mind. *That's your son, Mr. Ensor. And deep down, you love*

him. You screwed up once. Now's your chance to make it right.

Clark nodded—he didn't know why—and threw his arms around his son.

Rosie watched it all next door with a smile from inside of her house. She had called Larry on his cell phone and was prepared to have a few things to say about the "FOR SALE" sign she had seen on her front lawn in the middle of the flamingos. That was her home, after all, and that was where her sons had grown up. She wanted to tell him a thing or two about respect.

Rusty was on the wall looking at her above the piano, where Rusty the cat rested, asleep. Rosie thought she saw his expression change, that big, goofy smile turn into something even warmer. A moment later, she knew for a fact she saw the picture blink.

Rusty the cat jumped to the floor all of a sudden and stood at Rosie's feet, watching as Rusty Roth on the wall waved to Rosie.

"Hello?" Larry said from the other end of the line.

Rosie gasped.

"Hello? Mom, is that you? Are you okay?"

"Ummm—" she stuttered. "—um, Larry, dear, could you hold on a minute?" Without waiting for an answer, she let the phone drop to her side. "Hello, Rusty."

"Hi, Roseblossom," Rusty said. Rosie giggled. "Good to see you again."

"I miss you," she said with a smile. "It must be wonderful being in the joy of the Lord, though! Oh, mercy me, I can't wait to meet you there someday!"

Rusty—the real, genuine spirit of Rusty Roth inhabiting his picture on the wall, the one who was not a hallucination brought about by Rosie's old age or the drugs from the nursing home—thought about this for a second and decided not to tell her about Lucretia. He decided not to tell her about how wonderful it had been to hear her song one more time from deep within Connor Ensor's mind, how it had awakened him, and how he had led the coup that overthrew Upsilon Turquoise not once, but twice. He decided not to tell her how the initial investigations into Lucretia's soul bargains, completed not two minutes ago, had made evident that he, like Connor, had been saved by the power of Christian forgiveness, had been released from Lucretia's contract so that his soul could travel to that island in the Atlantic and sip frosty martinis with Jesus Christ.

"You will," he said simply. "Listen, Rosie, be nice to the boys, okay? They don't understand what was at work here."

Rosie huffed. "Rusty, I don't care if you're dead. You've still gotta listen to reason. Larry and the boys misbehaved. They wanted to sell the house!"

"I saw," he said, "but they're not going to now. You're back. You let Atlas off the hook for bigger sins than this."

"But they need a scolding!" Rosie said.

"They need to know that their mom's okay," Rusty said. "Now I know that was a real demon next door, but that don't mean they have to. Let them fight the demons they have to face instead of having to worry about you, too."

Rosie sighed, and the weight of her age began to press down on her again. She wanted to cry out in weakness, to say that the boys were right and she needed to be in a home. But something drew her back to forgiveness, back to a simple explanation. She didn't need a nursing home. She had hedges to trim, cross-stitching to complete. And she had oatmeal cookies to make for the church bake sale.

"Thank you, Rusty," she said. "I'll see you soon."

"Don't rush it," he said. "Ain't no sense in that."

She wanted to scowl at the picture, but she smiled warmly as the expression faded back to the Rusty that had hung on her wall for so long, grinning, teeth hanging out, the orange patches all over his face.

Slowly, she picked the phone back up to her face.

"Sorry about that, Larry," she said quietly.

"Mom?" he asked. "Who's over there with you? That sounded like Dad."

Atlas, meanwhile, began to walk south once again, back toward his apartment. For almost 900 miles, he walked south toward Florida with nothing to his name but the clothes on his back, a coin that Sorano had used to go into his mind (it had helped), and an ATM card that allowed him to withdraw as much money as he needed wherever he needed without a surcharge.

Halfway down the street, he threw the ATM card in the garbage. A hobo who found it months later built a house made out of beer cans with it.

This time, as he walked south, the legacy of Atlas didn't follow him. Those he had encountered the first time had heard of what had happened at the Bailey Waffle House already—the network between them was so tight that it traveled even faster than any traveler could hope to move.

Even so, every Waffle House between Bailey, Kentucky and Port Meriweather, Florida offered him free waffles and hash browns—not because of what he had done, but because he had the foresight to bring Rosie Roth to the Bailey Waffle House with him.

The old set of glyphs drawn about his first journey were a success, though, the story much better than the reality. They paid James Earl Jones a lot of money to narrate them.

